

BOOKS

THOUGHTS ON NOÉ JITRIK'S NOVEL *LOS LENTOS TRANVÍAS*

Jorge Luis Sierra

Apart from the enchantment and peacefulness that reading this book produced in me, I believe that Noé Jitrik has spun his memories with a fine and delicate thread that converts them into a literary object. In the same vein as authors such as Luis Cardoza y Aragón, the prose of this Argentine writer who is undecided about returning to his country or staying in Mexico, is a generous and didactic sample of the infinite paths that literature can take.

Slow Trolley Cars enters the daily domain yet emerges from it with an enriched memory. It does not deal with the faithful ordering of autobiographical events nor with a simple nostalgia-saturated chronicle, but rather is a literary work which reshapes some aspects of the past and reduces the significance of others until achieving equilibrium. In one sense, *Slow Trolley Cars* gives value to an everydayness buried for a long time under the weight of triviality. In yet another sense, it awakens his and our emotions until they

become unified in a single text emanating from the writer and becoming richer in the reading. Here closes, as Mexican poet Eraclio Zepeda would say, the great circle of literary phenomenon.

As in poetry, Jitrik's text generates an endless number of possible interpretations, all equally valid. We can discover ourselves in it, moved by shared experiences, or lose ourselves as did Jitrik's brother, who, before he died, wrote his own voluminous and detailed version of the events in *Slow Trolley Cars* because he was opposed to his brother's treatment of family anecdotes.

The author dilutes the boundaries between poetry and narration, and gives the text a smooth syntax which makes the events flow as if they had indeed occurred that way. This could be called a poetic narration that catches the rhythms of early life and creates its own atmosphere of truth. A writer's efforts could not be better. Nevertheless it could be forgotten that Jitrik's work obeys the rigor of writing and unwriting because he works always with a rough draft on the desk, and sustains that the text can be purified as many times as required.

Even though Jitrik declares at the beginning of this "vast, unique, growing narrative paragraph", that it has no other reason or goal than as a response to the exigencies of an overflowing memory, *Slow Trolley Cars* is, more than an existential necessity, a literary project finding its influences and seeking to make its own contribution.

Nevertheless, what could become a literal work in the hands of a poor writer, emerges as the re-creation of dreams and images translated into literary structures; as the author

himself says, "...one way of seeing, understanding and preserving the important cores of that environment, reproducing, amplifying, and deepening them in the same severe manner which defined the tone of my childhood era."

The influence of Proust cannot be ignored, even though the disavowance of his work weighs on our consciences. The unknown phantom of Proust runs through Jitrik's work. The childhood of each writer, their expansive paragraphs, evoking familiar images and environments, the writing of a novel moved by other genres, are similar points. Jitrik let act "an acquired unrepressed inclination toward Proust and what he was capable of doing with his nuances." But neither can *Slow Trolley Cars* be spoken of as a Proustian work. As Jitrik clarifies, there is an early inclination toward Proust, but one has his own projects.

The author rejects totalistic projects which, on the supposition of coherence, can squash the author's nearness to his own experience. In life, as in literature, all paths are possible and valid, and their meaning cannot be grasped through the eye of a needle. Each person has his particular world view, and by no means is its

universality denied. It can be forgotten that totality is no more than a holistic attitude that guides, but does not make compulsory any path of research. "The fragments of thoughts" preferred by Jitrik constitute a serious and modest respite from the whirlpool of thought that wishes to be in the vanguard.

Noé Jitrik is closer to Cardoza y Aragón. Both develop a prose of extended feeling. If Cardoza can indeed hear the herons change to the other foot, then Noé speaks of the beauty of an Argentine mother so anxious to see the world that, in the absence of books, she reads pieces of newspaper. While the Guatemalan writer finds in his people a rich fountain of written works, Jitrik discovers that daily life is a Pandora's box where the riches of humanity lie in wait to be gathered by literary works.

Slow Trolley Cars is also a form of knowledge. For the author, writing is a "particular type of research, rather diffuse, about the unity that can exist between my own being and a deed, my relationship to the world." This is perhaps a response to the common clamor of the 1960's for a literature removed from praxis rich in form but empty of content.

In Jitrik's text, the content is born in the full development of form. There is no rupture despite the different biographical referents after literary elaboration. On the contrary, even as the writing enters an unknown area, the events become even more meaningful.

This virtue is not forbidden in literature, but pertains to the essentiality of the art which takes events without pulling them out of their context and puts them back further enriched. The work of art —said



Gabriel Zaid— is nothing more than a world; it widens the world. It does not mean that literature is a substitute for science, but rather that it is a form of knowledge which can transcend the empirical and the immediate.

It is clear, on the other hand, that Noé Jitrik's intentions cannot pass as discursive defense of literature. It is an exercise where words no longer are instruments but are passions in life, where personal history finds the written word, where autobiography is the immense desire to live and write.

After *Slow Trolley Cars*, our childhood, family, and friends will never be the same. Perhaps we will better appreciate sugar, coffee, dogs, the neighborhood, Sunday outings in Chapultepec park, matinees, the clothes hanging on the line, trips to the bakery, gossip at the laundry, or the noisy trolley cars which have disappeared but are recorded in our memories. Perhaps our words will be as seductive as the written voice of Noé Jitrik.

Noé Jitrik, *Los lentos tranvías*. Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, colección Nueva narrativa hispana. México, 1988. 120 páginas.

MORE ON THE ORIGIN OF THE AZTECS

Erik Huesca

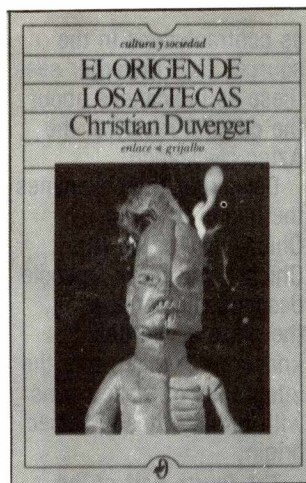
French historians have created a grand tradition for their interest and efforts in discovering the origins of the Aztecs. Faithful to this tradition, Christian Duverger recurred to both hispanic sources and to the few pre-

hispanic codexes and maps that survived the Conquest and subsequent destruction, in his investigation for this book. The author explains in this work, translated by Carmen Arizmendi, how a nomadic people later formed the great Aztec Empire, which fascinated Europe during the Conquest of Meso-america.

Duverger's book comes at an apt moment, shortly before the 500th anniversary of the European invasion, led by Christopher Columbus' expedition in 1492. The French researcher reconstructs the Aztec past from Aztlán — "Place of the Seven Tribes" — to Mexico, from Toltecayotl to Chichimecayotl: he explores the double cultural heritage of the Aztecs or Mexicas. Christian Duverger searches for the origins of this people even in the semantics of the words used to relate their story, and he calls our attention to contradictions in historical documents that were important sources for historians such as Soustelle, García Cubas, Jiménez Moreno, Orozco y Berra and Clavijero, as well as in codexes and other documents written shortly after the Conquest.

These contradictions are explained by Duverger in the light of the ideological positions of the historians of the time, who generally had their own particular interpretation of the history they studied: "Alongside formal or symbolic interpretations, one must consider an element that is extremely important in understanding Aztec history: that is, that it was written in Mexico, after the Conquest, and with ends that today we would not hesitate to call propagandistic"

In the first part of his research, the author remarks that the apparent contradictions are due to



the fact that the Mexican past is a constructed past, and that "the clues got tangled" during the search for origins. But, he adds, "one cannot refrain from studying the conditions in which the historical sources were constituted; the specific conditions which presided at the time when the documents were written illuminate by themselves many obscure points in the manuscripts. These also provide us with important indications about the spirit which inspired these 16th century codexes, which today are wrinkled and yellowed with age". The author also emphasizes the need for reliable editions of certain ethno-historic texts because, due to editorial or historical conditions, some of these texts were modified, or, as in the case of the manuscripts from Quauhtinchan, Puebla, sometimes were not even published.

In the second part of the book, Duverger discusses how the Mexicas sought to legitimate their stay in the Valley of Mexico, and specifically, on the island which the other Nahuatl people of the region called Mexico, through the construction of a circular history. The words Mexico and Aztlán have no written symbols or glyphs in the Aztec writing, and besides,

notes the author, Mexico was an island. These coincidences and others lead Duverger to assert that "the Aztecs wanted to legitimize both their presence and their authority as well as affirm their tribal particularities. This is the context in which the so particular construction of the Aztecs' origins should be analyzed."

After their first attempt to settle in the area of Chapultepec, the Mexicas had to settle on the island of Mexico, and they appropriated the name that the island already had. It is from this point that Mexican or Aztec history is incorporated with myths and stories from neighboring tribes and settlements — a tactic, says the author, that the Aztecs used in their conquest of other peoples: "the merging of ideas and traditions was an essential part of Aztec strategy: instead of unilaterally imposing their rites and beliefs, the Aztecs used to practice a sort of ideological importation, making efforts to assimilate some of the practices in use among the indigenous peoples they conquered."

The Mexicas did not hide their Chichimeca origins, on the contrary, they boasted about their pilgrimage, which they saw as a special strength corresponding to a dominant people. For this reason, says Duverger, dates were more symbolic than successive for the Aztecs, in contrast with the European vision of time: "This interpretation — which certainly has not been justified by any data — shows us a desire to explain an order of history which is totally alien to the Occidental mentality. This system, however, was commonly used in the pre-hispanic era, precisely because it allowed a fusion of history with myth: this alchemy of time allowed a