

UNDER COVER

The Politics of Fiction

It is often said that we in the U.S. take a great deal for granted: our freedoms, our quality of life, our very democracy. To this one might add, our literature.

By "our literature" I refer, in fact, not so much to Melville, Twain, and Faulkner but rather to Tolstoi, Dostoevski, and Chekhov. For who among us who has come to know Anna Karenina, Prince Myshkin, or the three Prosoorov sisters has not thought of them as people like ourselves—alive, meaningful, real. And certainly few of us, if any, have interrupted the steady turning of pages suddenly to exclaim: "But wait a moment, this was written in Russian!"

It is here, in this personal immediacy of the work, that we come upon the translator's craft. It is a profoundly subtle craft, one measured, ironically, by its ability to conceal itself. Indeed, the very finest translations are those in which the translator has, in the Joycean phrase, refined himself out of existence. What *does* exist—alone, so to speak—is the text, an *English* text, revealing a work of art that hitherto was obscured from the English-speaking world. Accordingly, one might argue that in the absence of translation *War and Peace*, like the famous tree falling unheard in the forest, would not exist in the non-Russian-speaking world.

The probable reason that the Russian novelists seem so close to us today is that their translations have been with us throughout our lifetime—indeed, for more than a hundred years. In this respect, all too few of us recognize our debt to a brilliant young Englishwoman, Constance Garnett, who, during a blazing decade of productivity, translated dozens of works by major Russian authors: Gogol, Turgenev, Tolstoi, Dostoevski, and more. And perhaps still fewer of us are aware that these authors, because of their availability to the English-speaking reader, had an enormous effect upon the English-speaking *author*—influencing such diverse novelists as Henry James and Ernest Hemingway. Translation, in other words, does not simply alter the language in which a work is written; it profoundly alters how other-speaking peoples think about and react to the culture therein revealed.

A case in point. Some ten years ago a group of graduate students was bemoaning the absence of great modern authors—writers of the ilk of Joyce or Woolf or Conrad. Suddenly one fellow—the best read among us (he'd gone to St. John's in Annapolis, the "Great Books" school)—announced that there was great literature being written, but that it was all coming out of Latin America. I recall very clearly my own reaction: a combination of surprise (if they're great, why haven't I heard of them?), frustration (I can't read Spanish), and Northern chauvinism (who cares about Latin America!).

In retrospect, such naiveté seems amusing. Within a year of my friend's startling declaration, such Latin authors as Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, and Octavio Paz were about as well known—and widely read—as Updike, Bellow, and Cheever. The reason, of course, is that they were available in translation. What followed is a lesson in

cultural history.

For the first time North Americans began to look at South America as something other than a continent of petty tyrants, quasi-comic revolutions, and a homogenous peasantry. Through the art of fiction we began to identify individual lives. We met people who had names, families, addresses. They became identifiable in the way Huck Finn is identifiable, or Raskolnikov or Stendhal's Julien Sorel. And as we grew to know them in this way, we grew appalled at the depth and breath of our own ignorance. How, we asked with a shock, had we allowed ourselves to be so blind: to Latin America's art, to its diversity, to its needs. And how, we wanted to know, could we correct this blindness; what, in other words, could we read?

Happily, the answer today is, A great deal. The last decade has been witness to an ever-growing demand for, and availability of, Latin American works in translation, particularly works of fiction. *Worldview* readers know this, for many of these works have appeared in our review pages in recent years. Among the contemporary authors represented are Manlio Argueta (*One Day of Life*), Gabriel García Márquez (*Chronicle of a Death Foretold*), Antonio Lobo Antunes (*South of Nowhere*), and Manuel Mujica Lainez (*The Wandering Unicorn*). Furthermore, though we in the U.S. are new to discover Latin American literature, it does not follow that Latin American literature is anything new. Thus, the July issue of *Worldview* includes a review of *Macunaima*, by Mario de Andrade, first published in Brazil in 1928. That Random House chose to reprint de Andrade in 1984 speaks for both its commitment to Latin American literature and, one suspects, the public demand for the product. Motive aside, the fact remains that *Macunaima* would be unavailable to us today had E. A. Goodland not first translated it.

Surely it is no mere coincidence that our interest in the literature of Latin America parallels a deep and growing interest in the political configuration of the region. The last ten years have been among the most dynamic in the region's modern history—and consequently a period of intense media coverage and public attention. Revolution in Nicaragua, civil war in El Salvador, a military coup in Guatemala, treaty negotiations in Panama, the vicissitudes of Pinochet in Chile, a trans-Atlantic war in Argentina, and the struggle for land reform and social justice nearly everywhere—such upheaval has transformed our attitude toward the region from one of, at best, benign neglect to one of immediate concern, placing it center stage with U.S.-Soviet relations and Mideast affairs.

The concomitant growth of political and literary interest is, I believe, a process of cross-fertilization, and one that dramatizes the inherent interrelationship of the political act and the written word. One thinks of Disraeli's novels and Churchill's histories. To be sure, this is not a new observation, only a new application of an old truth. What is exciting is that we are quite early on in our exploration of this newly discovered literary vein; that with increasing activity by authors and translators alike we will be provided with ever more and better tools to continue that exploration. What is frightening is the suspicion that, despite our best efforts and good intentions, we might fail to make the correct political choices and thereby condemn the region to further anguish and despair.

—J.T.