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In this book, Paul McAleer establishes the connections between comedy and the themes of human identity and utopia. He first locates the beginnings of humorous writing in Latin America in nineteenth-century editorials, which became *costumbrista* satirical portraits and novels. However, one could also point at the novelistic genre, with works such as Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi's *El Periquillo Sarniento*, first published in 1816. Along with the contemporary Latin American comedy writers McAleer lists (all of them men), one could also add Roberto Bolaño, Fernando Iwasaki and, of course, many women writers, including Rosario Castellanos, Ana Lydia Vega, Griselda Gámbaro, Luisa Valenzuela, Rosario Ferré, Silvina Ocampo, Angélica Gorodisher, and Ana María

Shúa. While all the chapters are dedicated to male writers (Gustavo Sainz, Alfredo Bryce Echenique, Jaime Bayly, and Fernando Vallejo), in my view it would have been more fulfilling to include works by women writers (or at least to address the reasons no woman writer was included) in order to provide a contrasting female perspective.

As stated, McAleer's book studies the relationship between comedy and the need to express both individual and social identities, pointing out that laughter depends on the internalization of societal norms, rules, and values. The introduction summarizes the evolution of the utopian impulse in comedy from its origins to the comic drama and the comic novel. According to McAleer, comedic prose has always been fascinated by the youthful maturation of the *Bildungsroman*. This is reflected in the five contemporary comic novels studied in his book, as they follow European comic *Bildungsroman* and its utopian impulse. However, while inscribing comedy's utopian impulse, they all fail to bring it to fruition in a happy ending: "Their protagonists are not allowed a satisfactory social or individual identity" (16). In each chapter, McAleer tries to identify postmodern symptoms and cultural hybridity, as well as how they are manifested in the structures and themes in the comic and utopian impulses inscribed by the novels. Perhaps the problem with this approach is that the book takes the postmodern condition of Latin America for granted, without questioning or problematizing this assumption (as has been done, among others, by Aníbal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, and several of the participants in Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar's 2001 edited volume *Alternative Modernities*). Only in the conclusion does McAleer admit that

Latin American modernity and postmodernity are quite different animals to their counterparts in the West. Latin American modernity constitutes the failed attempt

to homogenise Latin American culture under the rubric of an Enlightenment and modernising utopian ethos, while postmodernity constitutes the conscious recognition of this failure and the resurgence of heterogeneity within the fragmentary schema of neoliberal economic policy. (149)

According to the author, although the five novels—written by four different Latin American authors in different postmodern contexts—resort to a combination of different comic modes (parody, comic irony, the grotesque, the absurd, the burlesque, farce, travesty, the absurd or the festive), their comedy is mainly satirical and/or burlesque.

Chapter 2, deals with comedy and female identity as a site of contestation in the Mexican Gustavo Sainz's *La princesa del Palacio de Hierro*. The analysis is carried out in the context of the traditionally limited role of women in comic literature and the contrasting images of the female character in the novel. According to McAleer, there is a transnational clash of gender politics between a male chauvinistic objectification of women and the more progressive views of feminism, youth culture, and the *La Onda* literary movement (of which Sainz was a founding member). This ideological ambivalence ends up limiting both the theme of female identity acquisition and the utopian impulse of the novel. The protagonist, the Princess, is described as an “unreliably unreliable narrator” and as an unstable, hybrid, postmodern subject who lacks a center and a sense of agency. Curiously, the view of 1970s Mexico City as a postmodern space seems to be first taken for granted in the analysis and then contradicted: “Logic tells us that, if we Europeans and Latin Americans have lost our notion of psychic unity along with our sense of the logical real, then surely such volatile

and zany comic characters, as well as examples of farcical comedy, would no longer be funny. Yet they still are” (71).

The third chapter focuses on transnational and transcultural aspects in the Peruvian Bryce Echenique’s *La vida exagerada de Martín Romaña* (as well as on the second part of the diptych, *El hombre que hablaba de Octavia de Cádiz*), in light of its sarcastic portrayal of Latin American and European leftists in the 1960s and 70s, who are described as cruel, dogmatic, and ineffective. According to McAleer, the narrator’s marginalization and socio-cultural exile from different sectors of society and subsequent identity crisis embody the novel’s own identity cultural crisis. Along these lines, once again the marriage formula in *La vida* (which he considers, because of its self-referential nature, the most postmodern of the novels analyzed in his book) does not signal a utopian conclusion. McAleer also sees these two novels as an amalgamation of postmodern and metafictional autobiography, comic *Bildungsroman*, and picaresque novel. Ultimately, their treatment of identity, utopia, and satire is, according to him, “symbolic of the wider demise of modern utopian thought in Latin America” (98).

Chapter 4 concentrates on the topics of identity loss, hybridity, violence, and post-Enlightenment dystopia in Fernando Vallejo’s black comedy *La virgen de los sicarios*, in the context of its author’s loss of individual, class, and national identity in a new Colombia. In Vallejo’s novel, according to McAleer, the dystopian variations of comedy are much deeper than in previous works, bringing it closer to the Menippean satire. From this perspective, the protagonist’s return from exile only to find an unrecognizable homeland articulates the process of dissolution in the novel. As in the analysis of previous novels, McAleer pays particular attention to the function of linguistic and

cultural hybridity, as well as to the use of different narratees: in this case they echo the dissipation of the protagonist's individual identity. Overall, according to the author, Vallejo's novel "satirizes many aspects of contemporary Colombian society, yet fails or deliberately avoids suggesting or implying an alternative, a solution, apart, of course, from death. The novel, therefore, clearly reflects a context in which shared values and ideologies have dissipated" (119-20).

The last chapter analyzes the narrator's identitarian crisis within the homophobic context of 1980s Lima, the more tolerant Miami, and the narrator's own contradictory views of homosexuality in the Peruvian Jaime Bayly's *La noche es virgen*. Again, *La noche* "inscribes the utopian narratives of the comic *Bildungsroman* yet fails to bring them to fruition" (143). McAleer considers this novel symbolic of the current transformation of the concepts of identity and utopia in Latin America. *La noche* is, according to him, one of the first public discourses on homosexual identity and queer politics in Peru, and as such, it echoes both a process of inclusion of marginalized groups initiated in the 1990s and the collapse of Enlightenment values.

In an excellent conclusion, McAleer addresses, among other topics, how the concept of the self and the notion of a single reality have been questioned and altered in the Latin American postmodern contexts of the novels he analyzes. As he explains, these novels depict the "self as a dialogic and fluid construct that is interdependent on socio-linguistic interactions" (159). Likewise, uncertainty about the real is portrayed by undermining "the anti-idealism technique of comic realism by either metafictional or other avoidance strategies and, thus, recoil from implying that a shared or naturalized concept of the real exists" (151). He also points at the confused politics of these novels,

their rejection of universal narratives, and the loss of utopian impulses as a sign of the transformation of the Latin American novel from modern to postmodern. The author clarifies, however, that the loss of the utopian impulse in these novels is not indicative of a total loss of utopianism in Latin America; rather, it signals a loss of faith in the universalism of the values of Enlightenment utopianism and bourgeois ideology.

Tellingly, all five novels echo the erosion of middle-class enclaves. McAleer also claims that in these novels the self is more radically decentered and liminal than in the Boom novels or *testimonios*.

Overall, McAleer has written a well-researched and theoretically sound (with Northrop Frye as the primary referent) study of the Latin American comic novel, which is undoubtedly an important contribution to Latin American studies. His detailed attention to linguistic variation in each novel also makes it a unique study. There are, however, some questionable approaches, besides the aforementioned lack of women writers and the assumption of Latin America's postmodernity. For instance, from the beginning the author takes it for granted that Latin America is not part of the West, an assumption that is, in my view, highly questionable. Likewise, I find the numerous comparisons with English literature in the introduction unnecessary. In addition, for future editions of this outstanding study, a more careful editing of terms and names, particularly those in Spanish, should be done ("Doñoso" instead of "Donoso;" "*Martín Riveras*" instead of "*Martín Rivas*;" "Novela de tierra" instead of "Novela de la tierra;" "perunizado" instead of "peruanizado;" "Zorrilla's *Don Juan Tenerio*" instead of "Zorrilla's *Don Juan Tenorio*"). Finally, while I find the selection of the novels appropriate, since only four authors are included in the study, perhaps it would have been more representative of

Latin American narrative to select authors from four different countries (two of them are Peruvian).

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