

One Earth, Four or Five Worlds: Reflections on Contemporary History

By Octavio Paz

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich,
187 pp., \$14.95

By Gene H. Bell-Villada

BESIDES BEING MEXICO'S leading essayist and avant-garde poet, Octavio Paz is a free-ranging intellect of a sort now rare in our country. The creator of some astounding experimental verses, he has also composed dozens of books on countless topics, notably *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, a classic meditation on Mexico, now required in courses worldwide; *The Bow and the Lyre*, a superb work of poetic theory; and *Claude Levi-Strauss*, the best available introduction to the French savant.

In a continent where literati can become guerrillas or senators, Paz exemplifies that noted South American tradition: the Writer as Public Figure. Unlike most U.S. poets, so specialized, Paz reads widely in history and politics, and handles metaphors on Marxism with equal flair. But he likewise incarnates the tradition's darker side: the Writer as Priest, even as Dictator.

Every word from Paz carries weight in Mexico; through his prestigious, glossy magazine *Vuelta*, Paz and his select circle wield enormous influence every month. His sway with foundations can either block or promote an upstart author. Whoever dares cross Paz risks marginalization, and when in 1978 the novelist Jorge Aguilar Mora published a dense, erudite book attacking the master, it was met with total silence.

Paz was always drawn to the prophetic, inspired strain in literature (Blake, Surrealism), and his work shows traces of this. But he's too mindful of his role as icon, and long ago he fashioned a style in the lofty oracular.

Now 71, Paz impresses one as never having been brash or young, and he is an exceedingly ambitious patriarch: since the '40s his entire career seems aimed at the Nobel rafters. And so, when (to everyone's surprise) the 1982 award went to his arch-rival García Márquez, Mexico's cultural cliques were abuzz with the news of Paz' wrath and high dudgeon.

Vuelta's back pages did politely acknowledge the Colombian Nobel with a half-inch of column space. Meanwhile, Paz appears to have gone all-out to prove that he is *not* García Márquez—not pro-revolution and certainly *not* leftist. Stockholm must be watching; rumors say that the Nobel men will soon honor a Latino of more "balanced" views.

Goodbye to Marxism.

One Earth, Four or Five Worlds is a collection of Paz' most recent geopolitical speculations from *Vuelta*. Until the early '70s, Paz was a man of the left, and his *Labyrinth of Solitude* was subtly shaped by a non-sectarian '40s Marxism. Here he bids goodbye to all that and, recasting himself as Mexico's Solzhenitsyn, sides squarely with the Western neo-conservative camp. Terrorism, Soviet-Cuban threats, the silliness of Third Worldism, the troubling U.S. decline—these are the issues and the optics now.

The view of Moscow is startling when contrasted with that of a younger Paz, who in *Labyrinth*



ESSAYS

The writer as Dictator

dismissed as shallow the notion of an all-encompassing U.S.-Soviet struggle, and rather singled out anti-colonialism as the key conflict of our times. The born-again Paz chants anti-Soviet refrains as shrill as those of any right-wing *yanqui*.

He cites plenty of Western Kremlinology but ignores the thoughtful, balanced researches of American Sovietologists like George Kennan, Stephen Cohen or Jerry Hough. Paz' Soviet bloc is one in which such shifts as Hungarian market reforms count for little, and "Soviet shock troops" is his idea of Cuba and Vietnam. Russia itself comes off as economic flop, for Paz can't concede that, by most measures, the Soviet population is a great deal better off than the Mexican.

Cuba is relentlessly anathematized, its citizens pronounced poorer today than they were in 1958. Much is made of the emigré Cubans, whereas three million Mexicans on the lam in El Norte (proof of a failure of the Mexican Revolution?) are magically absent from these pages. "Castro" is a curse word readily employed dozens of times; the word "Pinochet" is not once mentioned.

All of this converges into the heady Reaganism of the final essays, where the Sandinistas are all but satanized and certain *contras* much encouraged. "Central America is a battleground for the superpowers." "Russian imperial expansion has arrived in Latin Ameri-

ca." (*sic*) But U.S. world hegemony is seen as bumbling and indecisive, while U.S. investments and soldiers abroad (the world's fourth biggest economy, incidentally) do not exist in the universe according to Paz.

So goes the prevailing drift of this volume, and no doubt it will

be played up by our mainstream journals. Still, Paz remains complex, a man of culture—he is no philistine technocrat *à la* Jeanne Kirkpatrick. Paz can be quite sensible on Israel ("the Palestinians, like the Jews, have the right to a homeland") and straightforward on U.S.-Mexican historical differ-

The Magic Kingdom

By Stanley Elkin

Dutton, 317 pp., \$16.95

By David Moberg

AFTER YEARS OF ELABORATELY publicized searches for a cure, Eddy Bale's son, Liam, finally succumbs to his rare disease. Bale, who helped create the image of a heroic Liam, realizes that such terminally ill children are not quite as saintly as their image. Rather than persecute these children by ineffectually prolonging their pain, he concludes, they deserve some escape or reward. Thus he hatches his plan to take seven gravely diseased children to Disney World, the Magic Kingdom.

Stanley Elkin's tale was inspired by a TV report in England of such an expedition. But Elkin, who has established himself as a writer of supremely deft, bitterly funny and surprising stories and novels (such as *The Franchiser*, *The Living End*, *A Bad Man* and *The Dick Gibson Show*), could not bear to deliver us the tearjerking sentimentality that a TV journalist would seek in this event. Instead,

once again, Elkin presents us with a group of well-meaning but ultimately not terribly competent people with their own occasional streaks of cruelty, indifference or corrupting self-interest. For example, the Queen of England, whom Bale approaches as a sponsor for the trip to the Magic Kingdom, is a bit of a hypocritical cheapskate. Bale is as much interested in finding some fame and meaning for his own life as in helping sick kids. Mickey Mouse turns out to be a sadist. And love—for nearly every other writer a magic potion—carries a bittersweet mixture of tenderness and passion with reminders of death and tainted life.

But that makes Elkin sound too much like a curmudgeon. What is particularly triumphant about his work is his ability to make us like and care about people who are obviously deeply flawed, because of their complex, exacerbating hu-

manity. A short chapter actually sees the U.S. as chief obstacle to positive change in Latin America, but the effect is cancelled out by the rest of the book. (*Time* will not be quoting that chapter.)

He is hopeful about China, indulgent toward the "traditionalism" of Khomeini and informative about Shi'ites and Hindus—Paz has a rare knack for summing up remote worlds. The book is splendidly written (and beautifully translated by Helen Lane). Paz is, as always, a virtuoso of the lapidary epigram.

At his worst, however, those strengths become tics; we're ever aware of the Old Sage dispensing

Every word Octavio Paz writes carries weight in Mexico.

wisdom, making platitudes sound deep. The solemnity finally gets tiresome—of all our great writers, Paz rates the lowest in humor. And as Mexico's cultural czar he is filled with himself; among his cited sources one finds many titles by Octavio Paz ("see my book such-and-such").

Paz has fast become the Latino author most regularly invoked by Yankee mediocrats (who have yet to read a line of his verse). Imperial minions will pilfer profundities from this book, this offering to our center-right captains of *Kultur*, and after Paz there is Mario Vargas Llosa, the other neo-conservative high artist now being tapped as the Thinking Man's Thieu or Duarte, "the Voice of Latin America" here in Reaganland. Mediocrats deluding themselves all: South-of-the-border intellectuals remain mostly left wing. But since when have political realities been the true calling of our press lords and their scribes?

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FICTION

No heroes or villains in Elkin's wonderland

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manity. If there are no heroes in his work, there are equally few villains. Like the narrator in *The Magic Kingdom*, who insists repeatedly that "everything has a reasonable explanation," Elkin is a rationalist, and even his characters appear to have a reason—however twisted it might seem to us—for odd things they do. Yet there always are mysterious turns to the lives in Elkin's fiction. And they almost always involve mundane realities, everyday quirks of the social universe rather than cosmic, world-historical forces.

The story in *The Magic Kingdom* is not terribly complex: Bale and his "seven dwarf" charges, suffering from diseases that bloat them, turn them blue, cause them to lose appendages, prematurely age them or otherwise create oddities while they kill, travel to Disney World with the help of a motley crew of male and female nurses

All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916

By Robert W. Rydell
University of Chicago Press,
328 pp., \$27.50

By Dave Roediger

YOUNGER ST. LOUISIANS' knowledge of the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition centers around the handful of built-for-the-fair buildings still extant and around stories concerning how the ice cream cone was invented there. So it always surprised me that when my grandmother-in-law reminisced about the fair she became animated on just one topic: the primitive Igorots. Looking back over 75 years she remembered their huts, dress and dances.

I doubted that much of what she said was accurate. "Igorot" seemed an unlikely name for a people, probably a corruption or a mythical tag attached to those displayed in an exotic sideshow. Only later did I learn that a Filipino tribe really was so named.

When I first read Robert Rydell's *All the World's a Fair*, I dove straight into the index, pursuing Igorots. They appeared in force, especially in the chapter on St. Louis. According to Rydell, the 114 Igorots at the fair there were the most numerous of the "wild tribes" in the Philippines reservation, an ethnological encampment of 1,200 natives of America's not-yet-pacified new colony. Just as the reservation was likely the most popular of the fair's exhibits, the "wild tribes" were the hits of the reservation. To understand the tragic story of the Igorots, it turns out, is to understand much about world's fairs in industrializing America. It is also to penetrate the class, racial and imperial relations to which those fairs gave expression, indeed shape.

The tradition of "displaying" Third World peoples—often alongside Afro-Americans and American Indians—at world's fairs in the U.S. was a longstanding one by 1904. But the Third World villages at the Chicago, Atlanta and Buffalo fairs over the preceding 11 years generally

lacked official stamps of approval. Despite some input from Smithsonian Institution anthropologists, the early villages, shunted to the midways, sometimes verged on being seen as pseudo-scientific sideshows. Exhibits more fully marshalling governmental and scientific authority on the behalf of white supremacy tended to consist of artifacts.

By 1904, the federal government, the St. Louis elite and academic ethnologists cooperated to assure that the Third World villages would grow in both size and prestige. The Philippine reservation virtually bore the presidential seal. Two years before the St. Louis fair, William Howard Taft, then the civil governor of the Philippines, observes that Filipino participation in the festivities would have a "moral effect" and would help in "completing pacification" of the islands. Shortly thereafter, President Teddy Roosevelt declared his agreement with Taft.

Federal approval and academic trappings enhanced the image of the villages while doing little to supplant the pseudo-science and the sideshow atmosphere characteristic of live ethnological exhibits at earlier fairs. The leading scientist advising the 1904 fair, W.J. McGee, preached a racial hierarchy of intellect. He differentiated between "enlightened" and merely "civilized" whites on ethnic terms before discussing "inferior" red, yellow and black people.

McGee repeatedly referred to encouraging Americans to shoulder the "white man's burden" as one of the exhibition's cherished goals. One McGee associate argued that whites possessed superior *hearing* as well as intellect. But the popularity of the Philippine reservation exhibit rested less on spurious claims to scientific authority than on what Rydell calls a "powerful mixture of white supremacist sexual stereotypes and voyeurism" among fairgoers viewing briefly clad villagers.

Ultimately the combination of loincloths and racist science threatened to undercut imperial goals. If Filipinos were so wild as to defy redemption, why build

and a doctor, each with his or her own curses. As the adults pursue their personal ends while attending to the children's needs, the children reveal their own troubled emotions—as confused about their sexuality as about their impending deaths, for example, their frailties and their quest for autonomy, all of which end on a tragic note that is soon brought down to a numbingly prosaic quotidian reality. Despite their time in this magic world—framed on each side by a

Elkin's new novel has the ability to make us like and care about people who are deeply flawed.

quirky snowstorm that falls only on Disney World—there is no redemption. Yet life, even in its most deformed and diseased expressions, goes on.

The writing, however, is elaborate, more than in Elkin's earlier works and at times too much for its own good. (The convoluted but colloquial sentences, each with multiple digressions and afterthoughts, and the accumulations of adjectives occasionally are the literary equivalents of too many rich desserts). But Elkin's own magic stems from his rich language, prickly wit, eye-opening sensibility and provocative description. The reader shares the obvious, sensual pleasure that Elkin derives from putting his words together. There is a rambling, scattered quality to the narration, but the asides are not extraneous. They are everything.

For all its serious themes of mortality and morality, *The Magic Kingdom* is—while possibly not Elkin's best work—another fine example of his welcome humor. For all its recognition of the sordid threads within each person's life, it ultimately makes humanity seem like not such a bad lot after all. ■

HISTORY

Third World on display at first World's fairs



All the World's a Fair

According to Rydell, the Igorots (above) at the 1904 St. Louis fair, were the most numerous of the "wild tribes" in the Philippines reservation, an ethnological encampment of 1,200 natives of America's not-yet-pacified new colony.

huge models to honor U.S. military triumphs in the islands? In a bizarre response to such concerns, Roosevelt, Taft and underlings urgently pressed for shorts and chemises to be issued to the Igorots and to Negritos in order to deemphasize the "savageness" of the villagers.

When appeals to authenticity won out over those to modesty, another solution to the "wildness" problem emerged. Anthropologists stressed that the Philippine population itself was ethnically stratified. The dark Negritos, dubbed the "missing link," would likely "eventually become extinct." Igorots, a step up, were capable of redemption and of a rise to the level of Indians or Afro-Americans. They managed, after all, to sing "My Country 'Tis of Thee" when Roosevelt visited the village.

It was further recalled that Spain had already exerted a civilizing influence in the Philippines and that over half of those on the reservation were not "wild tribesmen" at all but collaborators with the U.S. occupation forces. The latter had presumably made great cultural advances, though the whole argument was muddled somewhat when a mob of gun-firing Marines descended on the collaborators and threatened to lynch them for socializing with white women.

In the wake of the St. Louis fair, many Igorots were given over to the care of unscrupulous sideshow operators who embezzled the wages they held in trust for the

villagers, who were at times kept in the U.S. against their will. Gradually interest at later fairs shifted to the possibilities of imperialism in Latin America, especially with the building of the Panama Canal. Igorots continued to tour, but more unambiguously as a scantily clothed sideshow of "dog-eaters."

The story of the Igorots is as instructive as it is pathetic. It encapsulates most of the arguments in Rydell's challenging book; the

To understand world fairs in the U.S. from 1876-1916 is to penetrate the class, racial and imperial relations to which these fairs gave expression.

intimate connection of fairs to imperial projects and to class rule; and the role of government-connected scientists as the "high priests of industrial capitalism" and expansion. It also discusses the double edge of an American anthropology (and foreign policy) that recognized uplift and extinction as twin prospects for colonial people and the attempt of American elites, who as late as 1876 had shied away from the midway too plebeian and chaotic, to combine bureaucratically sanctioned racism with popular cultural forms.

All the World's a Fair is far from a perfect book. It is better—more ambitious, contentious and adventurous—than any perfect books are likely to be. Despite a failure to consider the popular racial attitudes with which elites interacted in their attempts to shape and foster racism, Rydell has written an important study. It includes a superb chapter on white supremacy, Booker T. Washington and fairs in the New South and tantalizing material on organized labor and the exhibitions.

It demonstrates, in a way increasingly rare in our balkanized historical profession, that class domination, oppression of Indians, anti-black racism and imperial expansion are not isolated phenomena, but the related stuff of which U.S. history from 1876 to 1916 is very largely made. ■

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