

# A Dead Dictator Doubles Them Up

*Death as a Way of Life*, by Francisco Ayala, translated from the Spanish by Joan MacLean (Macmillan, 218 pp. \$4.95), suggests Dostoevsky in the ironic crises that cause a dictator to topple and be replaced by a junta. Emile Capouya's literary criticism appears frequently in this and other magazines.

By EMILE CAPOUYA

FRANCISCO AYALA is a living classic, and apparently still at the height of his powers. That fact, sufficiently established in the Spanish-speaking world, is now made manifest to our climates and countrymen by the publication in English of this remarkable novel. *Muerdes de perro*, to call the book by its expressive and untranslatable original title, tells its story with the calm ferocity that is one of the characteristic moods of Spanish literature. Simply to mention *Lazarillo de Tormes*, *Don Quixote*, and the satires of Quevedo is to suggest how well represented in the Spanish literary tradition is the vision of the world as essentially unredeemable—and of men as bound in honor to attempt its redemption. The Spaniard feels personally responsible for the state of the cosmos. The disproportion between his dignity, which demands that he perform great things, and his subjection to the conditional world, generates in him the paradoxical spirit that erupts in savage humor, and engineers appalling confrontations between innocence and depravity, refinement and brutality, ideal order and gross detail.

Formal and ceremonious, the Hispanic peoples of the Old and New World live out a history marked by grotesque outrages against their own sense of propriety. It is no merely wilful imagination that, in this short novel about an unnamed and typical Latin American country, contrives—merely in the foreground—four murders, a suicide, an uncontested rape, and two castrations. And none of this can be shrugged off as Gothic exuberance on Mr. Ayala's part. If, in *Death as a Way of Life*, Senator Rosales is shot down on the steps of the Capitol, that startling scene can be matched by at least two instances from life in the last twenty years. (As I write this, indeed, the newspapers report that a Latin American diplomat, catching up

with a political opponent in a traffic jam, managed to put two bullets into him before being restrained.) As for castration, we may well assume that some of the animus and intemperance of the Castro revolution was a reaction to Batista's habit of thus mutilating the corpses of people who had annoyed him, leaving them afterwards at any convenient roadside.

After all this, it may be conceded that Mr. Ayala does not traduce reality, but will it be believed that *Death as a Way of Life* is a comic novel? It is, though. Horribly comic, implacable, fascinating. The story is an imaginative paradigm of the fall of a dictator, and the coming to power in his place of the usual obscurely connected junta of military and civil personalities. It is told by a cripple whose infirmity has kept him out of harm's way, free to pursue his self-imposed task of collecting documents for an eventual history of his era. The narrator's malice and literary pedantry tell us as much about the state of the nation as the documents he quotes, and prepare us for the *coup de théâtre* that, occurring on the very last page, gives a final ironic twist to the Dostoevskian succession of crises that make up the tale.

The comparison with the Russian writer is a measure of the intensity of imagination displayed in *Death as a Way of Life*. Francisco Ayala chooses in this novel to work on a narrower compass than we think of in connection with

Dostoevsky, but the shock of his breathless peripeties, managed with the same uncanny stagecraft, and the strain of brutal and despairing humor, suggest an unexpected affinity between the Spaniard and the Slav. The comparison, of course, has its limits. For one thing, Mr. Ayala is sane. His conceptions, for all their complexity, are articulated with a Latin clarity; in this sense, he could offer no greater contrast to the creative madness and muddle of Dostoevsky.

In any case, *Death as a Way of Life* seems to me to represent quite astonishing literary powers. Its appearance in English should be a signal to readers to expect and demand that the Ayala canon be successively made available to us (as far as I know, the chief work hitherto presented in English is the extraordinary tale included in the Modern Library's *Great Spanish Short Stories*). Mr. Ayala's wit transmutes itself naturally into style, for his gifts include the linguistic ones that we have almost given up hoping for from our writers. Even his meditated grossness is graceful—as when he sums up by "*sursum corda*" the reaction of a young arriviste to the proffered charms of his leader's wife. And this example of politico-sexual insight is one of the keys to Ayala's literary imagination, for he is preoccupied with the way in which appetites relate to action, and desire takes its crooked course toward realization.

Spanish is closer in spirit to English than any other Western tongue, but its kinship is with Elizabethan English for its magical combination of stateliness and the easy or explosive colloquialism. That situation presents the translator with special difficulties. It is pleasant to be able to say that Joan MacLean has given us a generally felicitous version of one of the masters of Spanish prose.



"I fly economy, but I think rich."

# The Letdown After the Airlift

**Armageddon: A Novel of Berlin,** by Leon Uris (Doubleday. 632 pp. \$6.95), describes a doomed love affair in 1944 between the daughter of an ex-Nazi and a handsome American Army captain. Daniel Stern wrote "Who Shall Live, Who Shall Die."

By DANIEL STERN

IT IS reported that when Oscar Wilde visited America the newspapermen were most anxious to elicit his opinion of Charles Dickens, who was then at the height of his popularity. "No one with a heart," Wilde told them, "can read the

death of Little Nell without laughing."

Leon Uris's new novel, *Armageddon*, reduces one to helpless historical paraphrase: no one with a heart can read Uris's tale of the tragedy and triumph of modern Berlin—without laughing.

No one with a mind, one should say. But in Uris's universe heart and mind seem to merge into one blob of sentimentality bolstered by exquisitely ferreted facts. (A note tells us that the research for this book was sponsored by the latest rival to the Ford Foundation: Columbia Pictures.)

One can almost hear the reasonable voices speaking: Why discuss Uris seriously? No one else does. His books are

bought by the millions and they make blockbuster movies—but that's all. The only reply one can make is, that the continuing success of an author who takes the greatest themes of the time and treats them as a sort of Classics Illustrated comic book without the colored pictures is a phenomenon with important implications.

But, first, let us examine the book itself. It opens with an epigraph: *Ich bin ein Berliner—John F. Kennedy*. Fair warning. We are in the presence of history. Next we meet our hero, Captain Sean O'Sullivan: handsome, rugged, and filled with hatred for the defeated Germans. (The time is January 1944.) The reason: his two brothers were killed in action. Naturally, before the book is ended Sean has had a tragically doomed love affair with a German girl, the daughter of an ex-Nazi.

The action moves from 1944 back in time to before World War I and up to, and just after, the Berlin airlift—the experience Uris poses as the West's *Armageddon*. The numerous and varied characters are composed of cardboard and sawdust. This is to be expected from Mr. Uris's past performance. When it comes to ideas he is on equally firm ground. In one stern passage he disposes of the "hate-filled and muddled ramblings of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Hegel, Treitschke, and Fichte." This, of course, may be dismissed as revenge for college philosophy courses. But for positive philosophy the book is choked with the baldest jingoism the most painful, reactionary nationalism masquerading as patriotism. America deserves better.

To give Uris his due, he does weave the endless fact-sheets he has dug up into a cinema-like fabric of intercutting that will please nostalgic fans of the Warner Brothers epics of the Thirties and Forties.

Thomas Mann wrote that "in our time the destiny of man reveals itself in political terms." This is not to say that a literature must concern itself exclusively with this angle of approach. But the nagging question remains: Why do the big political and social themes of the time go begging? To make a surrealistic mélange, for a moment, should it not, perhaps, have been Wright Morris who wrote Paddy Chayefsky's comedy of the Russian Revolution? How would Saul Bellow view the Israel of *Exodus*—or the Berlin of *Armageddon*? Where is James Purdy's novel about the darkly hopeful changes in the landscape of the South? It may be that only small talents are satisfied with easy answers to the great paradoxes of history. Or, sadder still, the truth may be found in Yeats's prophetic poem *Second Coming*: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

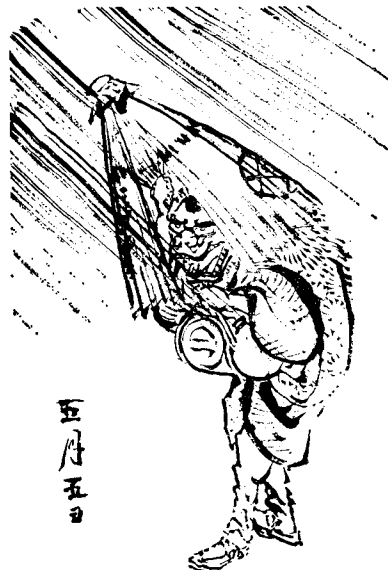
**The Fleeting World:** After the death of Hokusai in 1849, the Ukiyo-e school of painting declined. Extraordinarily deft, as well as prolific, he captured the passing scene with delicacy and wit. Theodore Bowie has selected and annotated for *The Drawings of Hokusai* (Indiana, \$12.50) 130 plates, representing, for the most part, previously unpublished sketches. Like Picasso, Professor Bowie observes, the Japanese artist is a "centrifuge throwing off styles from a perpetually rotating center of creative energy."



Two women lying prone.



Shoji, a drunkard proving his strength.



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