

Paul Julian Smith *The Body Hispanic*
3. LA MUJER ARANA AND THE RETURN OF THE BODY

It is very easy to read *El beso de la mujer arana* as a postmodern text in the vulgar sense of the term. The structure of the novel is fragmentary: we are given the words of the two protagonists with no intervention from a third-person narrator to tell us who or where they are. The texture of the novel is eclectic: the fragments of dialogue are supplemented by lengthy footnotes on such psychoanalytic topics as the Oedipus complex and repression and by the dry, factual reports of the prison authorities and secret police. The tone of the novel is reflexive: as a narrative about the telling of stories, it offers a critique of the reading process within itself. For example, when the humourless Marxist Valentin remarks how involved he has become with one of the characters in a film retold by Molina (a character about whom he knows almost nothing), then the reader of *La mujer arana* is also made to reflect on his or her engagement with the characters which Puig himself has equally deprived of conventional novelistic 'background'. I shall return to the question of narrative and its status in a moment.

The novel's fragmentation, eclecticism, and reflexivity can easily be read as camp: moral and political issues are, initially at least, overwhelmed by an all-pervasive sense of the aesthetic. Thus the second movie plot retold by Molina comes from a Nazi propaganda film. In the first scene handsome, blond soldiers raid a Jewish butcher's shop in occupied Paris, proclaiming that Europe will be free from hunger when the exploiters of the people are eliminated (P- 55). Later, the French night-club singer Leni manages to avoid the clutches of a lame Resistance fighter and falls into the arms of a divinely handsome German officer. as elsewhere, the focus of Molina's narration is on superficial, sensual detail: furniture, clothing, cosmetics; in short, the 'feminine' sensibility.

Puig, however, is not uncritical of exclusive relations between men. By making explicit the homosexual theme in his book, he makes us look again at such clichés as 'You're as much a man as I am' or 'All men are alike', both of which are addressed by Valentin to Molina (pp. 65, 147). Puig seems to be suggesting (like sonic feminists) that all men are homosexual, whatever their libidinal preference. But by calling attention to this theme (rather than repressing it as Fuentes does) he reveals that such relations are never uncompromised by power. Thus Valentin fails to convince Molina that it would be more liberating, less exploitative, if he (Molina) took a more active role in love-making. For Molina, pleasure cannot be separated from fear and domination (P. 246). Indeed earlier, when Valentin compares the cell to a desert island in which each may act in perfect freedom towards the other, Molina is unconvinced: he can conceive of no act of love which is disinterested (P. 206). As we shall see, the desert island is just another space on the surface of the earth, as subject as any other to the ravages of desire and capital.

Valentin and Molina might be taken at first as twin, incompatible heroes in the quest for freedom: the Marxist seeks justice in the economic sphere and the homosexual in its libidinal equivalent. But the action of the novel reveals that this is not the case. Valentin is unable to reduce his libido to the 'correct' ideological format: his real love is not the proletarian comrade, but a woman with a touch of class. And Molina has no interest in any project of sexual liberation: he seeks not the political right to freedom of expression as a gay man, but the unattainable fantasy of a woman's experience of love within a male body. If true emancipation seems impossible for either of the characters, then so does totalization: each sees from a conspicuously limited viewpoint, and in spite of the gradual blurring of the difference between the two (which culminates in their lovemaking) no solution is offered within the text to the political or sexual problems raised by Puig's choice of characters.

Valentin is in favour of the emancipation of women (p.23) and preaches that the quest for social justice must take precedence over the pleasures of the body (p.33). His sub-Freudian 'analyses' of characters in Molina's movies betray the same totalizing dogma as his political

prescriptions. But having set up this violent hierarchy of the economic and the libidinal, lie is forced to admit its inadequacy: there can be no conscious control over the choice of the desired object.

When Molina retells the Nazi narrative, Valentin is shocked: he says that this kind of fantasy is a dangerous delusion, an act of wilful alienation (1). 85). But if we take narrative as a form of knowledge, as a language game with specific rules, then we need neither reject fantasy as False consciousness nor evacuate it of all political content. Molina himself is well aware that narrative is conventional: he knows that the Resistance were heroes in real life-it's just that they're not in the film (p. 84).

Molina's films parade before us the well-worn stereotypes of femininity: the animalesque heroine of *Cat People*; the sentimental Parisienne, Leni; the innocent wife terrorized on the island of the zombies. Woman is natural, emotional, passive.

It is no accident that Leni should sing in a mock-up of a tropical lagoon. Like woman, Latin America is colonized from birth, a fictitious entity from its very inception.

The North American heroine of the *Zombie Woman* is greeted on her husband's Caribbean island by native drumming: Latin America is always already an exotic other, the perfect backdrop for the pulsating rhythms of the body. The zombies themselves can be read as parodies of the Third World subject, compelled to obey the master's voice, while straining for an autonomy which will always be denied.

Puig does not simply reject stereotypes of woman and Latin America; but nor is he content to revel in them. If there is no 'authentic' face behind the mask, then the stereotype is at once oppressive and pleasurable, actual and illusory. Perhaps these points will be made clearer by a close reading of a text from the opening paragraphs of *La mujer arana*.

'You can see there's something funny about her, that she's not a woman like all the others ... her face is a bit like a cat's

'And what are her eyes like?'

'Light-colored, almost certainly green , and she screws them up in order to draw better. She's looking at her model, the black panther in the zoo ...

'And she's not cold?'

'No, she doesn't notice the cold, she's as if in another world, completely absorbed as she draws the panther.'

'If she's absorbed in herself, she's not in another world. That's a contradiction.'

'Yes, that's it, she's all wrapped up in herself, in the world inside herself.'

A woman is the object of the voice's attention: the man's gaze roams over her face identifying each feature in turn. If she is feline, it is because, in the world of filmic stereotype, woman's sexuality is animal, and once aroused cannot be sated. 'The reference to 'a woman like any other' will prove ironic. For the novel's parade of extraordinary women will undermine any received notions of female essence. The second voice interjects to request more detail-but the first is not sure of the colour of the woman's eyes. As we learn later, he is describing a scene from a film, the original *Cat People* Of 1943, produced by Val Lewton and directed by Jacques Tourneur. As readers we cannot yet be sure that the novel is referring to a work of art outside itself-, but the pervasive, even oppressive, reflexivity of the book is limited at by the woman's activity. Just as the unnamed Molina 'paints' her in words, so she is drawing, attempting to represent the object of her desire and terror, the male panther in the cage. The question of whether she can be both self-absorbed and in another world as she draws seems trivial at first. But it announces an important theme in the novel. Does art induce authenticity or alienation in the subject? Are we led more deeply into ourselves or distracted from true self-awareness by the seductive lure of fiction? It is typical of Molina that he should claim that there is no distinction. The world within the self is another world: fantasy and authenticity cannot be separated.

By plunging us immediately into the act of story-telling, Puig hints at the importance of narrative in all its forms. This point is confirmed at the end of the novel. Valentin, horribly tortured, is hallucinating in the prison infirmary. The attention to the suffering body is here rather similar to Fuentes. In his dream Valentin comes to a tropical island, but finds it is made up of the white skin of a woman: desire and economics fuse once more in the fluid surface of his imagination (P. 284). He comes upon the spider woman (the name he has earlier given to Molina). The threads of her web pass through her body: again, the subject is multiple, constituted by its own chains or bonds. He thinks of the death of Molina, who has been killed by the revolutionaries as he waited to pass on information given to him by Valentin. Was Molina martyred for the political cause or did he choose to die romantically like one of the heroines in his films? The question can have no final answer.