

Esperanza Gurza. *Lectura existencialista de 'La Celestina'*. Madrid: Gredos, 1977. Biblioteca Románica Hispánica-Estudios y Ensayos, 257. 351p.

[Note. This review was originally penned by the late Dean W. McPheeters for publication in *Symposium*. Owing to a series of delays it did not appear there. Not long before his death, Prof. McPheeters sent his copy to me, knowing I would place it in my *archivo*. Although late, the review appears now--alas, posthumously--because of the interesting personal views it espouses. I feel certain Prof. Gurza will welcome this belated assessment, written a decade ago. After his retirement, Prof. McPheeters often told me he intended to offer me a note for this journal, a desire left unfulfilled. I hope these thoughts will fill that void. JTS]

It is perhaps inevitable that a great Spanish classic which in the last few decades has accumulated a bibliography rivaling that of the *Quijote* should be subjected to a variety of interpretations. One who has recently shown how *Celestina* is the product of conflicting medieval scholasticism and new Renaissance tendencies¹ is forced to admit the validity of the concept that during periods of violent transition, then as now, a work may indeed speak to our times in numerous ways, recalling what Cervantes' novel came to mean to the Romantics.

Professor Gurza in her first chapter, "Dos épocas de crisis y sus actitudes vitales," sets the stage for her future analyses, and in the second, "El existencialismo," reviews these philosophical trends, although the term "no designa [el] sistema o escuela" as it flourished in Europe between 1940 and 1950 (p. 46). Here one wonders whether the rapid changes in modern life styles and ideologies do not tend to date the thinking of

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several decades ago; yet in all fairness one must accept the premises of her arguments based as they are on vast reading. Particularly does she find basic to her interpretations the ideas enumerated by Jean Wahl (48-63) and summarized in her "Recapitulación" as

... 1) existencia, ser y trascendencia; 2) posibilidad y proyecto; origen; y ahora, situación, instante; 3) elección y libertad; nada y temor; y autenticidad; 4) el único, el otro, y la comunicación; 5) verdad-subjetividad, verdad-ser, y multiplicidad de verdades; y 6) paradoja, tensión y ambigüedad. Las primeras cinco son categorías ontológicas, mientras que la última se refiere a métodos y técnicas estilísticas empleadas por los escritores existencialistas. Se expusieron, asimismo, algunas imágenes, metáforas y mitos del existencialismo literario. (324-325)

From the third and longest chapter, "El amor y la expresión sexual como vías a lo consciente y a la realización de la existencia," the reviewer can select only a few tidbits of especial interest to him. For example, Gurza points out early that love and sexual expression are constants in the works of existentialist writers (72); Celestina in numerous remarks glorifies amorous sentiments. She disagrees with "... la crítica que se ha empeñado en hacer de Melibea un prototipo de ingenuidad e inocencia corrompida a través de las artes diabólicas de Celestina." Rather, "Su presencia en la obra crece en importancia y se agiganta en la medida que su gran pasión por Calisto se desarrolla" (88-89). I, too, have come to feel more and more that Melibea is the great protagonist; once Celestina and the conniving servants have served their function, Rojas summarily removes them. She finds that the death of Calisto "es la ironía más tajantemente existencial de Rojas" (112), and she concludes this chapter: "En el mundo de *La Celestina*, se existe, se es y se deja de ser por el amor" (133, author's italics).

In Chapter IV there are discussed the two types of transcendence: the lack of aspiration toward the absolute or God (the horizontal) and its opposite (the vertical). While hardly a theocentric work, *Celestina* is not atheistic. The procuress approaches Pluto as the deity and also, horizontally, as "another" (171). When Calisto affirms three times that Melibea is his God, one encounters an expression of vertical transcendence (164).

Professor Gurza does not lightly dismiss Calisto. I approve of the implied elevation of his role in the statement, "Al descender por la misma escala que lo condujo a su gloria, a la posesión de su falso dios, Calisto cae en la misma posición que el Lucifer de Dante en el último círculo del infierno" (165), assuming, of course, that hell is where Calisto ends up after his "absurd" death; Melibea clearly hopes to join him in some state of beatitude. Of course, in his dealings with "others" he operates on a

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plane of horizontal transcendence; when brooding he is literally prone, feeling that he is in a state of "abandono" ("Geworfenheit").

The main problem of the existentialist character is to create an authentic personality for himself. This tenet leads in Chapter V to the affirmation: "Celestina ... es el personaje que vive la existencia más existencialmente auténtica. Ha escogido el tipo de vividura que le conviene pero no se ha estabilizado en él" (189). And Calisto "me parece un tipo existencialista por excelencia," because "se encuentra fuera de la realidad, fuera de la moral y fuera de la sociedad" (207-208); her comparison of Calisto with Augusto Pérez of Unamuno's *Niebla*, an *abúlico*, true, but one who declares, "Mi imaginación no descansa" (208-209), is intriguing. It is precisely the lively fantasies of Calisto that I had occasion to analyze recently.² The chapter ends with Pleberio because he affirms in the final act that in a world lacking any divine transcendence "... el hombre queda aherrojado al ejercicio de su libertad, dentro de la Danza de la vida..." (212-213).

The sixth chapter deals with a variety of themes such as "ansiedad, temor, angustia; finitud de la existencia; absurdidad del mundo; comunicación, y aislamiento o soledad." While Gurza touches on most of the main characters, even Alisa who "cae ... en el más absoluto silencio y la obra da lugar a las páginas más patéticas de la *Tragicomedia*..." (229), it is Pleberio who stands out "... subrayando su profundo aislamiento del mundo y de la humanidad y lo absurdo de la situación en que se halla" (240). In his anguish and despair man turns to God "sólo para encontrarse con un silencio absoluto" (249).

At the beginning of the seventh chapter, Gurza points out that so far it has been a matter of reading existentially *Celestina* "a través de temas y actitudes filosóficas"; in the final chapter, "Dos retóricas paralelas," she discusses some of the literary procedures, techniques, and methods used by existentialist writers, even if rather summarily. Certain of these topics are known to readers of *Celestina* and it is interesting to view them existentially, as, for example, "La ironía" in which Pleberio again figures prominently: "Su gran pregunta, que deja entrever todo el pesimismo existencial de *La Celestina*, es la misma del ironista metafísico de si la vida vale la pena vivirse, cuando toda esperanza nos ha sido quitada" (315). Doubtless, further meditation on the part of Professor Gurza will permit greater development of the final views she presents. All in all, this is a most readable and stimulating study that adds new dimensions to the criticism of *Celestina*.

† D. W. McPheeters
Newcomb College
Tulane University

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NOTES

¹"Melibea and the New Learning," in *Historical and Literary Perspectives: Essays and Studies in Honor of Albert Douglas Menut*, edited by Sandro Sticca (Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1973), pp. 65-81.

²"La 'dulce ymaginacion' de Calisto," in *Actas del Sexto Congreso Internacional de Hispanistas (1977)*, ed. A. Gordon and E. Rugg (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto--Dept. of Spanish & Portuguese, 1980), pp. 499-501.



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