

THE BORZOV BOOK OF LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE

PART IV (4):

Polisberto HERNÁNDEZ:

"The ~~Casino~~ Balcony."

From: "El balcón," especially translated by Paula Speck, and Suzanne Jill Levine.

Note.

Although his only trip to Europe was a short one ^{and} in the late forties, the Uruguayan Polisberto Hernández can only be understood in the context of the Avant-Garde movement. Born in Montevideo in 1902, he had very little formal education and one clear purpose ^(in life:) to become a concert pianist. He managed to make ^{most} ~~a~~ living out of his highly personal interpretations of Falla and Stravinsky in provincial halls. He was more successful in his literary career. What he lacked in school ^{ing} he got ~~is~~ through personal contact with a select group of poets, artists and intellectuals who had French culture at their fingertips. They provided Hernández with the necessary Avant-Garde ^{books.} ~~education~~ ^{from} ~~these friends~~ Among ~~them~~ were the Franco-Uruguayan Jules Supervielle a very distinguished poet on his own, and Carlos Vaz Ferreira, the old master of South American thought. They encouraged Hernández to write down the absurd, sometimes pathetic, always unexpected stories he was always telling ^{orally.} ~~his~~ first four books were strictly domestic productions, written and published before ^{some of} he met ^{some of} those friends. They were small in size and pages, were printed in obscure (or even improvised) shops, they were met with public indifference. The first books to attract some attention (In Clemente Colling's Times, 1942; The Lost Horse, 1943) were published in Montevideo and by suscription. ~~some~~ ~~of the few reviewers the books had,~~ One of the few reviewers the books had, drew the obvious parallels with Proust and Kafka. Both novels were short and came from the same storehouse: Hernández' subtly discriminating memory. The first was ^{woven around some} recollection of his piano teacher, tenderly and mockingly presented in all the rotten splendor of his life. The second used the metaphor

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of a lost horse to mirror the losses of ^{his} life and memory. Both books ^{were} permeated by Surrealist humor. At fortyfive Hernández had his first trade book published in Buenos Aires: Nobody Bothers to Light the Lamps (1947). It was a collection of short stories, more tightly written and even more absurd than the previous novels. They had been anticipated in the best magazines of the River Plate area, including ^a very exclusive ^{one} edited by Borges. In spite of that, they failed to confirm his friend's anticipations. One of the few critics to review it insisted perhaps excessively ^{upon} the stories' shortcomings: a loose writing, a gratuitous imagination, a too obvious insistence on sexual symbolism. What the critic ^{then} missed was the poetry of the absurd, the understated humor of characters and situations. One of the best examples of those qualities is the story here selected. "The ^{winter} Balcony" ^{moves} very casually ^{from} some reminiscences of Hernández' concert life ^{to} the anecdote of a extremely imaginative lady who writes poems to her balcony. The way Hernández contrasted the crass materialiality of the real world with the ^{campy} and even pathetic lady showed him at his best. Four more books completed his production. One was a long short story, The Hortensias (1949), about a lonely gentleman who has a harem of rubber women. There is a pun in the title, Hortensia being ^{Spanish} both a woman's name and ~~the~~ the flower called hydrangea. The story ^{had been} ~~written~~ written in a hotel room in Paris, at the time of ^{Hernández'} only visit to Europe. The following two books were of short stories: The Inundated House, 1960; The Crocodile, 1962. The last book he wrote, Land of Memory, was published posthumously one year after his death in 1964. It was a long rambling evocation he had begun in 1944 and never fully revised. In the late fifties and ^{early} forties, Hernández finally received the recognition he deserved; he even began to have some influence. Traces of his absurd humor can be found in episodes such as the Bertha Trépat ^{celebrated} concert in Julio Cortázar's Hopscotch (V, 4). Like the Argentine writer, Hernández had the kind of childish, irre-

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orent turn of imagination which ^{catches} ~~grasps~~ reality unaware. He was like a man who had never learned to grow up and who continued to register the world's oddities and perversities with the same innocent voyeuristic eyes. Many readers were put off by this strange combination. Others found in it the proof of his genius. Perhaps they did not mind the fact that Hernández never quite grew up as a writer. He ^{was never a professional} ~~was never a professional~~ and the bulk of his production ^{seemed} ~~was~~ still ^{to be} in a first draft when he published it.

Note: The story has already been translated and is being typed in a fresh cppy. It will have 19 pp.