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José Promis, *La identidad de Hispanoamérica: Ensayo sobre literatura colonial*

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José Promis, *La identidad de Hispanoamérica: Ensayo sobre literatura colonial*. Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1987.

In *La identidad de Hispanoamérica: Ensayo sobre literatura colonial*, José Promis examines the development of Spanish American literature from its beginnings in the diaries of Christopher Columbus through its full integration into the Baroque school of 17th century Europe. Unlike a traditional history of literature, which examines writers and works within a strict chronological framework, Promis' essay approaches the task from a different perspective: he selects key texts from both the New World and the Old, from different historical moments and from different genres, and then analyzes what these texts reveal about the philosophical, political and religious attitudes of the writers who produced them. As the titles of the book implies, Promis sees literature as part of a search for cultural identity. What sets his essay apart from others with a similar focus is his unique way of approaching the texts, and the unusual contrasts and comparisons he brings out in his discussion of the works.

The book begins with a quick look at Spanish medieval literature as a reflection of what Promis calls "la casa buena medieval," or the worldview of medieval man. Promis defines this worldview primarily as an attitude toward the limits of the world, the existence of space, and the place of man within that confined space, and he shows how it is reflected in works such as *El libro de buen amor* and the *serranillas* of the Marqués de Santillana. With Columbus' discovery of America at the end of the fifteenth century, the concept of "la casa buena medieval" would begin to change as man suddenly found himself in a world without frontiers. It was these changes, Promis asserts, which produced the body of works that today constitutes colonial Spanish American literature.

Promis traces the development and evolution of different notions about reality, the power of language, the place of the writer, and the underlying ideological implications of literature as Spanish America undergoes its gradual transformation from newly discovered land to thriving colony. He examines not only the literature produced in the New World, but also weaves into his discussion references to classic texts from the mother country, such as the *Quijote*, *Lazarillo de Tormes*, *La Celestina*, and the *églogas* of Garcilaso de la Vega, thereby establishing some interesting parallels between works produced

within the same time frame on both sides of the Atlantic. Given the brevity of the essay, Promis manages to include an impressive number of writers in his study: he looks at the diaries of Columbus, Cortés' letters to Carlos V, the writings of Bartolomé de las Casas, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, Pedro de Valdivia, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, el Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, Juan Suárez de Peralta, and other *cronistas*; the prose works of Juan Rodríguez Freile, Juan de Palafox, Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora; the religious writings of Fray Diego de Hojeda, Fray Juan de Ayallón, Pedro de Oña, and Hernando Domínguez Camargo; the lyric poetry of Francisco de Terrazas, Miguel de Guevara, Juan del Valle Caviedes, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz; and the epic poetry of Alonso de Ercilla and Bernardo de Balbuena. As this long list of names suggests, Promis devotes attention to lesser-known writers as well as to those literary giants who dominate the pages of traditional history books. He does not discuss works and writers in exhaustive detail; nevertheless, his commentary is insightful, well-founded, and to the point. He establishes patterns that link texts together in meaningful ways and creates an overview of the period that emphasizes how Spanish America struggled to define its relationship to Spain in both cultural and political terms. For readers who know very little about Spanish American literature of the colonial period, Promis' essay is an excellent introduction. It is well-written, informative, and concise, thus bringing a vast body of work within easy grasp. For those who are already familiar with colonial Spanish American literature or who are accustomed to the latest trends in criticism, Promis' essay may not break new ground but, because the contents are presented in an original and interesting way, most readers will find it thought-provoking. It is an example of traditional scholastic writing at its best.

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