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***Luminous Cities. (Urbes luminosas, 1991).* Eduardo García Aguilar. Trans. Jay Miskowiec. Minneapolis: Aliform Publishing, 2002. 183 pp. ISBN 0-9707652-1-5.**

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The tradition of the epigraph in Latin American letters dates back at least (or most notably) to Sarmiento. Through these truncated, decontextualized passages by other, better-known writers, an author presents his bona fides, opening tiny windows to a panorama of interpretation. The epigraph confers a sort of benediction: hints at lineage; alludes to agenda; delineates epistemological intentions. The epigraph can serve as maxim, exhortation, ideal. Judiciously deployed, the epigraph suggests volumes of knowledge intimately known to the author and shared enticingly with the cultist reader: others, uninitiated, risk misapprehending the author's text.

Colombian writer and journalist Eduardo García Aguilar's collection of twenty-five short stories is headed by three epigraphs: one by Gabriel García Márquez that describes the simulacra of memory; one by Carlos Fuentes lamenting the condition of the perennial outsider; and one by Jorge Luis Borges, which reviews the ephemeral nature of reality and the lucid concreteness of artistic representation.

Paradoxically, the more epigraphs a book has, the harder it has to work to realize their promise. And when the names attached to the passages are these, benediction-by-association becomes virtually impossible. Rather than wondering at the author's erudition, the reader becomes irritated by his lack of self-restraint. Reading with so many epigraphs in mind, you can't help trawling for parallels, nexuses, and lacunae.

The book is more-or-less evenly divided into three parts. The stories in the first part, "Orgies and Mannequins," do indeed depict orgies (of lust or violence) and mannequins (bald and often animate) in a variety of settings: a Stockholm restaurant, a Baroque church in Mexico City, a Panama City brothel, a college campus in Bogotá. In an abandoned mansion in Rome, a man is consumed by a carnivorous sex-plant; in a Paris hospital the nurses enact literary copulations. Fuentes's cosmopolitanism converges here with Borges's peculiarly incorporeal characters--dispossessed Arabs, blind men, eunuchs--, and a Marquesian flair for detached excess, occasionally dipping into Spielberg (a man shoots two masked mullahs who come at him artistically waving scimitars); the stories generally end in scenes of grotesque, transdiscursive delirium.

The second part of García Aguilar's book, entitled "Garrets at the End of the World," has a more introspective, even autobiographical flavor. The stories describe the intemperate, idealistic lives of young expatriate South Americans in Paris, San Francisco and other cities, alluding frequently to the archetypal *Modernista* passage through an imagined metropolis. The romanticized, starving solitude of the writer is an old cliché; here and there updated by touches of Cortázar and Castañeda. García Aguilar's journalistic roots come through, too, in stories of Guatemalan guerrillas, war in El Salvador (elaborated on in García Aguilar's 1987 novel *Bulevar de los héroes*). Several of these narratives have a photographic quality: a girl sitting eternally by a rural train depot, a maimed sewer dweller, a futuristic vision of Insurgentes in Mexico City.

The book's final part, "Stendhal and Flaubert in the Stomach," is about connections: tunnels, subways, rivers, sewers, threads (narrative and corporeal) that form alternative, anarchical global cities. It is partly a love song to Cortázar's Paris and, in honor of that great expatriate's obsession with bridges, these vignettes connect the book as a whole for the reader. The author seems at his most natural and least overwrought in these pieces--less stories than settings--, some of which retell parts of "Orgies and Mannequins," but without the orgies or mannequins. Even Mexico City, which, in September 1985, became the epitome of the fragmented post-modern urb, is reconnected in its collective tragedy. Following Michel de Certeau, the narrator reads the city from the heights, then leaps into the illegible swarm below.

The question of whether this collection fulfills the potential of its epigraphs will be left for future readers. Part I seems more indebted to Castañeda than Borges, and Parts II and III are shaped by Cortázar and de Certeau--they explore the texture of cities through specifically literary experience. But *Luminous Cities* will appeal to those who love the world's great metropoli, especially two of its greatest: Paris and Mexico City.

The edition unfortunately contains a number of errors in what looks like a somewhat hasty translation to English:

'discrete' for 'discreet'; 'censor' for 'censer'; 'lancing' for 'hurling' (from *lanzar*); 'luxurious' for 'lustful' (from *lujurioso*); 'compromised' poetry for (socially) 'committed' poetry (from *comprometido*) and so on. Since the translator is also the publisher's Translation Editor (and was presumably trained by Gregory Rabassa), this is disappointing; one would hope it will be corrected for future editions.

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