

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

66

Volume 66

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the
Works of Today's Novelists, Poets,
Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters,
and Other Creative Writers



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835 Penobscot Bldg.

Detroit, MI 48226-4094

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 76-38938

ISBN 0-8103-4440-8

ISSN 0091-3421

Printed in the United States of America

Published simultaneously in the United Kingdom
by Gale Research International Limited
(An affiliated company of Gale Research Inc.)

Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC presents significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered by *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

The present volume of *CLC* includes Dawn Powell, Felipe Alfau, and Rosario Castellanos, all of whom had past works recently reissued in the United States and gained significant acclaim; Janet Frame and Rick Hillis, who won important literary awards in 1990; Sembène Ousmane and David Lynch, prizewinning scriptwriters and filmmakers; and Jim Harrison and Ian McEwan, authors of the recent popular and critically respected novels *Dalva* and *The Innocent*, respectively.

Perhaps most importantly, works that frequently appear on the syllabuses of high school and college literature courses are represented by individual entries in *CLC*. Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* and Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood* are examples of works of this stature appearing in *CLC*, Volume 66.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign writers, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups within the United States.

Format of the Book

Each *CLC* volume contains about 500 individual excerpts—with approximately seventeen excerpts per author—taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material in *CLC* provide them with vital information needed to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Features

A *CLC* author entry consists of the following elements:

- The **author heading** cites the form under which the author has most commonly published, followed by birth date, and death date when applicable. Uncertainty as to a birth or death date is indicated by a question mark.
- A **portrait** of the author is included when available.
- A brief **biographical and critical introduction** to the author and his or her work precedes the excerpted criticism. The first line of the introduction provides the author’s full name, pseudonyms (if applicable), nationality, and a listing of genres in which the author has written. Since *CLC* is not intended to be a definitive biographical source, cross-references have been included to direct readers to these useful sources published by Gale Research: *Short Story Criticism* and *Children’s Literature Review*, which pro-

vide excerpts of criticism on the works of short story writers and authors of books for young people, respectively; *Contemporary Authors*, which includes detailed biographical and bibliographical sketches of more than 98,000 authors; *Something about the Author*, which contains heavily illustrated biographical sketches of writers and illustrators who create books for children and young adults; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, which provides original evaluations and detailed biographies of authors important to literary history; and *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* and *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*, which offer autobiographical essays by prominent writers for adults and those of interest to young readers, respectively. Previous volumes of *CLC* in which the author has been featured are also listed in the introduction.

- A list of **principal works**, arranged chronologically and, if applicable, divided into genre categories, notes the most important works by the author.
- The **excerpted criticism** represents various kinds of critical writing, ranging in form from the brief review to the scholarly exegesis. Essays are selected by the editors to reflect the spectrum of opinion about a specific work or about an author's literary career in general. The excerpts are presented chronologically, adding a useful perspective to the entry. All titles by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type, which enables the reader to easily identify the works being discussed. Publication information (such as publisher names and book prices) and parenthetical numerical references (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of a work) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.
- A complete **bibliographical citation** designed to help the user find the original essay or book follows each excerpt.
- A concise **further reading** section appears at the end of entries on authors for whom a significant amount of criticism exists in addition to the pieces reprinted in *CLC*. In some cases, this annotated bibliography includes references to material for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights.

Other Features

- An **Acknowledgments** section lists the copyright holders who have granted permission to reprint material in this volume of *CLC*. It does not, however, list every book or periodical reprinted or consulted during the preparation of the volume.
- A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all the authors who have appeared in the various literary criticism series published by Gale Research, with cross-references to Gale's biographical and autobiographical series. A full listing of the series referenced in the index appears on page 426 of this volume. Readers will welcome this cumulated author index as a useful tool for locating an author within the various series. The index, which lists birth and death dates when available, will be particularly valuable for those authors who are identified with a certain period but whose death date causes them to be placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, Ernest Hemingway is found in *CLC*, yet a writer often associated with him, F. Scott Fitzgerald, is found in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*.
- A **Cumulative Nationality Index** alphabetically lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by numbers corresponding to the volumes in which they appear.
- A **Title Index** alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the current volume of *CLC*. Listings are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, novellas, dramas, films, record albums, and poetry, short story, and essay collections are printed in italics, while all individual poems, short stories, essays, and songs are printed in roman type within quotation marks; when published separately (e.g., T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*), the title will also be printed in italics.
- In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale has also produced a **special paperbound edition** of the *CLC* title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers and will be published with the first volume of *CLC* issued in each calendar year. Additional copies of the index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index: it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is disposable upon receipt of the following year's cumulation.

A Note to the Reader

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume in the Literary Criticism Series may use the following general forms to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

¹Anne Tyler, "Manic Monologue," *The New Republic* 200 (April 17, 1989), 44-6; excerpted and

reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 58, ed. Roger Matuz (Detroit: Gale Research, 1990), p. 325.

²Patrick Reilly, *The Literature of Guilt: From 'Gulliver' to Golding* (University of Iowa Press, 1988); excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 58, ed. Roger Matuz (Detroit: Gale Research, 1990), pp. 206-12.

Suggestions Are Welcome

The editors welcome the comments and suggestions of readers to expand the coverage and enhance the usefulness of the series.

Acknowledgments

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Felipe Alfau

1902-

Spanish-born novelist.

Alfau's highly experimental novels, which are frequently compared with the works of Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, and Vladimir Nabokov, are characterized by ironic wit and layered, self-reflexive narratives. Focusing on traditional Spanish culture, Alfau self-consciously explores the relationship between reality and fiction, often presenting himself as a character in his own works. His first novel, *Locos: A Comedy of Gestures*, drew little attention upon publication in 1936 due to limited distribution. Those who did publish reviews of the work praised its eccentric humor and complex structure, classifying it as a form of baroque romanticism. When *Locos* was reprinted in 1988, critics recognized the novel's innovative, modernist approach, and Alfau is now considered a neglected pioneer of modern fiction.

Alfau emigrated to New York City during World War I, where he found work as a music critic on a Spanish newspaper. Several commentators have maintained that *Locos* employs a musical motif in its variations on the theme of ironic absurdity, and the novel's form has been frequently described as a series of closely linked short stories. Critics have also characterized *Locos* as a modernist detective novel in which the true identity of every character is a mystery. For example, in a chapter titled "Fingerprints," a character named Don Gil argues that fingerprints discovered at the scene of a crime offer indisputable proof of a person's guilt, regardless of contradictory evidence. Shortly thereafter, his own fingerprints are discovered at the site of a murder and, despite his innocence, Don Gil prefers imprisonment to admitting the fallibility of his theory. The real murderer's identity is obscured among the elusive characters who appear in continually shifting circumstances. Alfau himself is a recurring character in *Locos*; in the first chapter, "Identity," he observes an eccentric gathering at the Cafe de los Locos, and selects the cast of his novel. His chosen characters behave as though they have minds independent of the author, and periodically become uncooperative, as when a character named Gaston attempts to escape from the writer's grasp in order to shape his own adventure in "reality." Alfau's tenuous control over his characters has been interpreted as a means of expressing the relationship between reality and the writer's imagination. Michael Dirda asserted: "[Alfau] does everything to call attention to the fact that what we are reading are fictions, artificial constructions. He pursues the novelistic equivalent of Brecht's epic theater, where the actors play at their roles with casual detachment and may even gesture knowingly to an audience required to judge the action rather than simply swallow it."

Alfau's second novel, *Chromos*, published forty-two years after its completion in 1948, was nominated for a National Book Award in 1990. Focusing on a group of Spanish im-



migrants in Manhattan during the 1930s, this work satirizes such Spanish institutions as bullfighting and Catholicism. Reviewers have described *Chromos* as a series of stories within stories, reflecting the layered, musical pattern of *Locos*. Alfau again appears as a character at the novel's opening; he is encouraged by a friend to write about Spaniards living in New York City. Later, in his writing room, Alfau discovers faded chromolithographs of traditional Spanish scenes and dreams of the novel he will write. The imagined book juxtaposes sections from his friend Garcia's novel about a stereotypical Spanish family, with another story about a man who can jump forward in time, and with Alfau's conversations about Spain at various cafés and parties. Critics praised the novel's humor and discussed how its themes of failure and loss are associated with the Americanization of Spanish culture, the constraints of Spanish traditions, and the frustrations of writing. A reviewer in *Publishers Weekly* asserted: "Alfau's prose lurches from conversational banter to baroque sentences that nearly explode under the strain of their internal contradictions and subversive wit. This remarkable, if verbose, novel is a worthy successor to Alfau's *Locos*."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

NOVELS

Locos: A Comedy of Gestures 1936*Chromos* 1990

OTHER

Old Tales from Spain (children's book) 1929

Edith H. Walton

[*Locos: A Comedy of Gestures*], obviously, is just the book for connoisseurs of the bizarre. Felipe Alfau, who calls himself an author at the mercy of his characters, is a young Spaniard living in America and writing, very wittily, in English. His scene, however, is Spain, and his brand of exotic romanticism is definitely Latin. He has, it seems, been influenced by [Luigi] Pirandello—indeed, he barely troubles to disguise it—but one suspects that he does not take the Pirandellian theories very seriously. Plaintively proclaiming that his characters are anarchic and uncontrollable, he proceeds to guide them into ingenious, diverting mazes.

If one is to believe Mr. Alfau, he first encountered his characters at a certain rendezvous in Toledo called the Café de los Locos, or Café of the Crazy. (It is, he explains, frequented by bad writers in quest of types for their books.) There are gathered all those fantastic people who are destined to dance strange fandangoes through the pages of his novel. They are glimpsed only briefly at first, but the attitudes in which one surprises them prove to be wholly characteristic.

Having set his stage, so to speak, Mr. Alfau insouciantly shifts the scene to Madrid and gets down to business. His characters, transferred from Toledo, begin to strut and talk and to disobey their author's behests with an alarming stubbornness. When they behave inconsistently, infringe the laws of time and space, are detected in a double role, Mr. Alfau disclaims responsibility. These characters are new at the game, he says, and not yet disciplined. They are playing out a meaningless "comedy of gestures," the details of which must not be scrutinized too carefully.

To be more concrete, Mr. Alfau builds up his book as a series of short stories which at first appear to be almost unrelated. Gradually, however, a pattern emerges; the paths of his characters cross, and cross again; the same drama is rehearsed a second time, but from a different and often contradictory angle. The point, if it can be made clear, is this: these characters always behave like themselves, but the circumstances of their life are apt to vary slightly. Sometimes Lunarito, the most elusive of them all, is the mistress of Gaston Bejarano and sometimes she is his wife; again she will turn up as a servant girl of the unhappy poet Garcia—who also shifts rôles a bit as this bewildering comedy progresses.

Since they are so variable, one cannot be too precise about

these extraordinary creatures. Among them, however, are Don Gil Bejarano, who went to prison rather than admit his theory of fingerprints wrong; Donna Micaela Valverde, that weird, alluring woman who fell in love with Death; Don Laureano Baez, the king of Madrid beggars; Chinelato, the mongrel giant with Oriental blood whose cruel, adventurous career approached the fabulous. Among them also is Gaston, or El Cogote, who fell in love—much to Mr. Alfau's embarrassment—with his sister, Carmen, and kidnapped her from the convent where she was a most unconventional nun.

In piecing together this pastiche of strange, interlocking tales, Mr. Alfau's technique is as variable as his characters. Sometimes he will tell his story practically straight; again he will supply a running commentary of footnotes, indicating that his characters are behaving badly; at another time his puppets will comment on their creator; still later he will befuddle the reader by having one of his characters fall in love with a "real" person, or by having a "real" person clamor to become a character. It is all very complex and amusing, and the best thing to do, as Mr. Alfau says, is to remain unsurprised by anything that happens.

Locos, then, is no book for the forthright. It is perverse, a little decadent and extremely self-conscious. Also, however, it is most entertaining—effecting as it does a unique blend of wit and baroque romanticism. Mr. Alfau, when he goes Pirandello, often overreaches himself, but his better episodes—"The Beggar," "Fingerprints," "The Wal-let"—are very good and very funny indeed. *Locos* is a *tour de force* which would not bear repetition, but of its kind it is clever and unmistakably original.

Edith H. Walton, "The Pirandello Manner," in *The New York Times Book Review*, March 29, 1936, p. 7.

Groff Conklin

[Alfau's *Locos: A Comedy of Gestures*, is a] goofy book. Written in 1928; probably in search of a publisher for eight years. The second subtitle of the book reads: *An Author at the Mercy of His Characters*. It's like that: self-conscious, cute. It turns out to be a book of short stories, most of them containing the same characters. Scene, Madrid. Psychologies, abnormal. Style, affectedly simple. And yet there is a haunting quality about the setting and the characters—necrophiles, suicides, harlots, professional beggars, and a West Indian Don Juan, name of Chinelato, who is revealed in glimpses. A funny story about the infallibility of fingerprints, another about Madrid's plague of thieves; the last story in the book the best, about a man who had a phobia of dogs and of spring. Delicate, spun-glass, affected, irritating, eccentric stuff; not dull. (pp. 323-24)

Groff Conklin, in a review of "*Locos: A Comedy of Gestures*," in *The New Republic*, Vol. LXXXVI, No. 1116, April 22, 1936, pp. 323-24.

Mary McCarthy

[The Discoverers club is] that little circle of the intimate friends of literature which has recently coalesced under the chaperonage of Farrar and Rinehart. To these Discoverers, five to eight times a year at approximately bi-monthly intervals, that publisher introduces his debutant authors. In the course of a year the members of the club receive five to eight limited, autographed, numbered first editions of the work of new writers. The snob appeal of this sales promotion stunt is plain. The idea is, of course, that these books will not be just any old first novels, but the first shy efforts of potentially valuable talents—"books," in Farrar and Rinehart's own words, "that cause an unmistakable sense of excitement to sweep our editorial offices."

The tragic flaw in the scheme is, clearly, the fact that in one year there are not five to eight new talents per publisher; indeed, there are not five to eight new talents. Farrar and Rinehart were lucky enough to get for its first Discoverers' selection *Locos*, a bright, eccentric novel by Felipe Alfau, a young Spaniard writing in English. . . .

Locos was a witty, fantastic novel of modern Spain, a novel of forms and surfaces, demanding comparison not with literature but with art. In a general way it was related to the baroque tradition of architecture. More intimately and specifically it was concerned with the *surréaliste* movement in painting. The characters of the story, habitués of a bohemian resort called the Café of the Crazy, were dark, extravagant, grotesque. The laws that governed their behavior were the laws of the dream world: the plot was built out of time shifts, shifts of attributes, out of dislocations and distortions. Yet all that was strange, wild, and irrational in the matter of the novel was gracefully contradicted by the blandness of the manner. The style was an instrument of very great precision. It recalled the smooth miniature technique of Dali, the high polish of Pierre Roy. Those reviewers who were inspired by the instability of the characters of *Locos* to compare it with the plays of Pirandello missed the point. They ignored the glittering finish of the novel, the *déagé* air of the author. Doggedly they tried to grapple with it as a novel of ideas, to writing philosophical concepts out of a formal decorative piece which Alfau himself described [in the subtitle] as "a comedy of gestures."

Mary McCarthy, "Two 'Discoveries,'" in *The Nation*, New York, Vol. CXLII, No. 3704, June 27, 1936, p. 848.

Mary McCarthy

[The essay excerpted below appears as an afterword in the 1988 edition of *Locos*.]

Fifty-two years ago, on June 27, 1936, I reviewed [*Locos*] in the *Nation*. Very favorably [see McCarthy's excerpt above]. The author, Felipe Alfau, was said to be a young Spaniard writing in English. Spain was Republican then; the Franco revolt that turned into the Spanish Civil War began on July 19, three weeks and a day later. The charm exercised on me by *Locos*, therefore, cannot have been a

matter of politics. And I was ignorant of Spain and Spanish. It was more like love. I was enamored of that book and never forgot it, though my memory of it, I now perceive on rereading, is somewhat distorted, as of an excited young love affair. Alfau, or his book, was evidently my fatal type, which I would meet again in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and more than once in Italo Calvino. But *Locos* was the first. And it appears to have been the author's unique book, fittingly, as it were. I never heard of Alfau again, though for a time I used to ask about him whenever I met a Spaniard; not one knew his name. Maybe that was because he lived in the United States, if indeed he did. But in this country I never found anyone besides me who had read *Locos*. Now the book is being reissued. (p. 145)

To come back to it has been a bit eerie, at least on first sight—a cross between recognition and non-recognition. For example, what has stuck in my memory is a lengthy account of a police convention in Madrid that coincided merrily with a crime wave, the one giving rise to the other: crooks converged on the city, free to practice their trade while the police attended panel discussions and lectures on criminality. Well, it would be too much to say that none of that is in *Locos*; it is there but in the space of a few sentences and as a mere suggestion.

The fifth chapter, "The Wallet," begins: "During the 19— police convention at Madrid, a very unfortunate occurrence took place. Something went wrong with the lighting system of the city and the whole metropolis was left in complete darkness." It is the power failure that offers the assembled criminals their opportunity.

It was a most deplorable thing, for it coincided with the undesirable immigration of a regular herd of international crooks who since the beginning of the World War had migrated into Spain and now cooperated with resident crooks in a most energetic manner. . . . [it] came to pass that during the Police Convention of 19—, Madrid had a criminal convention as well. Of course, the police were bestowing all their efforts and time upon discussing matters of regulation, discipline and now and then how to improve the method of hunting criminals . . . and naturally, after each session . . . had neither time nor energy to put a check to the outrages. . . . Therefore all crooks felt safer and freer to perform their duty in Madrid, where the cream of the police were gathered, than anywhere else.

That is all, a preamble. The body of the chapter has to do with the stolen wallet of the Prefect of Police. The power failure, which provides a realistic explanation, had slipped my memory, and I was left with the delightful illogic—or logic—of parallel conventions of police and criminals. The purest Alfau, a distillate.

"The Wallet," actually, may be the center of the book, whose subject is Spain regarded as an absurdity, a compound of beggars, pimps, policemen, nuns, thieves, priests, murderers, confidence artists. The title, [*Locos*], meaning "The Crazies," refers to a Café de los Locos in Toledo, where in the first chapter virtually all the principal characters are introduced as habitués suited to be "characters"

for the bad fiction writers who, like the author, drop in to observe them. There are Dr. de los Rios, the medical attendant of most of the human wreckage washed up at those tables; Gaston Bejarano, a pimp known as El Cogote; Don Laureano Baez, a well-to-do professional beggar; his maid/daughter Lunarito, Sister Carmela, who is the same as Carmen, a runaway nun; Garcia, a poet who becomes a fingerprint expert; Padre Inocencio, a Salesian monk; Don Benito, the Prefect of Police; Felipe Alfau; Don Gil Bejarano, a junk dealer, uncle of El Cogote; Pepe Bejarano, a good-looking young man, brother of El Cogote; Doña Micaela Valverde, a triple widow and necrophile.

Only missing is the highly significant Señor Olózaga, at one time known as the Black Mandarin, a giant, former galley slave, baptized and brought up by Spanish monks in China, former butterfly charmer in a circus, former potentate in the Spanish Philippines, now running a bizarre agency for the collection of delinquent debts and another for buying and selling dead people's clothes. But he is connected with the other "characters" of the *Café de los Locos* both in his own right and by marriage to Tía Mariquita, his fifth wife, who lives in a house that coughs—their secretary, mistaken for her husband, is murdered by Don Laureano Baez and his daughter/maid Lunarito—one of many cases of mistaken identity. As the Black Mandarin in the Philippines, he has sought the hand of the blue-eyed daughter of Don Esteban Bejarano y Ulloa, a Spanish official, and been rejected because of his color. This, precisely, was the father of Don Gil Bejarano (see above), the brother-in-law of the Prefect of Police and inventor of a theory of fingerprints, which pops up in Chapter 4, where, incidentally, we find Padre Inocencio playing cards with the Bejarano family while the young daughter, Carmen, is having sex with her brother Gaston.

Such underground—or underworld—links are characteristic and combine with the rather giddy mutability displayed by the characters. Lunarito is Carmen, who is going to be Sister Carmela; at one point we find her married to El Cogote, none other than her brother Gaston, who cannot, of course, be her brother if she is the daughter of the beggar, Don Laureano Baez. And yet Don Laureano's wife, when we are introduced to him as the bartender of the *Café de los Locos*, is Felisa, which is the name of Carmen's mother, the sister of Don Benito, the Prefect of Police. . . . In the Prologue, and occasionally thereafter, the author makes a great point of the uncontrollability of his characters, but this familiar notion (as in "Falstaff got away from Shakespeare") is the least interesting feature. The changing and interchanging of the people, resembling "shot" silk, has no need of the whimsy of a loss of auctorial control. If any aspect of the book has aged, it is this whimsicality.

It is not only the characters of *Locos* that have that queer shimmer or iridescence. Place and time are subject to it as well. A fact I think I missed back in 1936 is the discrepancy between the location of the *Café de los Locos*—Toledo—where the "characters" are gathered for inspection, and their actual residence—Madrid. What are these Madrileños doing in Toledo? I suppose it must be because

of the reputation of Toledo as a mad, fantastic city, a myth, a city, as Alfau says, that "died in the Renaissance"; he speaks of "Toledo on its hill . . . like a petrified forest of centuries." The city that died in the Renaissance and lives on, petrified, can of course figure as an image of Spain. One more quotation may be relevant to the underlying theme of impersonation as a national trait: "the action of this book develops mainly in Spain, a land in which not the thought nor the word, but the action with a meaning—the gesture—has grown into a national specialty. . . ."

Spain and its former possessions—Cuba and the Philippines—constitute the scene; their obverse is China, for a Spaniard the other end of the world, and here the provenance of Señor Olózaga, baptized "Juan Chinelato" by the bearded, tobacco-smoking monks who raised him.

One thing that certainly escaped me as a young reviewer is the hidden presence of this "Juan Chinelato" in the first chapter, the one called "Identity" and laid in the *Café de los Locos*. He is there in the form of a little Chinese figure made of porcelain being hawked by Don Gil Bejarano in his character of junk dealer. "Don Gil approached us," writes Alfau.

'Here is a real bargain,' he said, tossing the porcelain figure on the palm of his hand. 'It is a real old work of art made in China. What do you say?' I looked at the figure which was delicately made. It represented a herculean warrior with drooping mustache and a ferocious expression. He had a butterfly on his shoulder. The color of the face was not yellow but a darker color, more like bronze. . . . 'Perhaps it is not Chinese but Indian,' Don Gil . . . looked slightly annoyed. 'No, it is Chinese,' he said." And he continues to praise it: " 'Yes, this is a real Chinese mandarin or warrior, I don't know which, and it is a real bargain.'

A minute later, thanks to an inadvertent movement, the figure is smashed to pieces on the marble-topped *café* table.

This is a beautifully constructed book and full of surprises. Another example: one does not notice in this opening chapter the unusually small hand of Don Gil, seen only as a mark on a whitewashed wall. The lightly dropped hint is picked up unobtrusively like a palmed coin several chapters later when Don Gil is being arrested at the reluctant order of his brother-in-law because his fingerprints have been found all over the scene of a crime: "Don Gil had very small hands . . . and the handcuffs did not fit securely enough. . . . 'Officer, those handcuffs are too big for me. You had better get a rope or something.' " In his conversations with the Prefect, he has kept working "the man from China," that is, the man who has the perfect alibi but is tracked down by science through the prints his hands have left. His last article, published in a Madrid newspaper on the day of his apprehension, is entitled "Fingerprints, a sure antidote against all alibis," and his last words, which he keeps reiterating as he is carried off in the police wagon, are "I am the man from China. . . . Fingerprints never fail."

Perhaps police work and criminality, just as much as mad, fantastic Spain, are the subject of *Locos*. And considerable detection is required on the reader's part, to be repaid, as in the hunt for "Wanted" lawbreakers, with a handsome reward. For instance, among the clues planted to the mute presence of Señor Olózaga in the Café of the Crazies there is simply the word "butterfly"; I failed to catch the signal until the third reading. And I still have a lot of sleuthing to do on Carmen-Carmela-Lunarito and the beauty spot on Lunarito's body that she charges a fee to show. A knowledge of Spanish might help. In the Spanish light, each figure is dogged by a shadow, like a spy or tailing detective, though sometimes the long shadow is ahead: "She stood at the end of her own shadow against the far diffused light of the corner lamp post and there was something ominous in that." It may be that this is the link between the theme of Spain and the theme of the criminal with his attendant policeman. In some moods *Locos* could be classed as "luminist" fiction. But I must leave some work (which translates into pleasure) for the reader.

If *Locos* is, or was, my fatal type, what I fell in love with, all unknowing, was the modernist novel as detective story. There is detective work, surely, supplied by Nabokov for the reader of *Pale Fire*. I mentioned Calvino, too, but there is another, quite recent example, which I nearly overlooked. [Umberto Eco's] *The Name of the Rose*, of course. It is not only a detective story in itself but it also contains an allusion to Sherlock Holmes and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. But in *Locos* Sherlock Holmes is already present: while in England Pepe Bejarano pretends to have studied under him, which explains his uncanny ability to recover his uncle, the Prefect's, wallet. The grateful police officer, who does not know whether Conan Doyle's creation is a real person or not, wants to express his thanks. "'Yes, Pepe, yes. I should like to write an official letter to that gentleman, to that great man—Cherlomsky, is that the name?'"

Yes, there is a family resemblance to Nabokov, to Calvino, to Eco. And perhaps, though I cannot vouch for it, to Borges, too. (pp. 145-49)

Mary McCarthy, "Felipe Alfau's 'Locos,'" in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 8, No. 3, Fall, 1988, pp. 145-49.

Michael Dirda

When the novelist Balzac lay dying, he is reported to have cried out, "Send for Bianchon! Bianchon will save me!" There was, however, no physician by that name in Paris. Then someone remembered that Balzac himself had created Horace Bianchon, the worldly yet brilliant doctor of the *Comédie humaine*.

Writers often remark that characters can take on a life of their own, but in a small subset of novels this is literally true: When the authors step away from their desks for a cup of coffee, their creations go off to play on their own. Modern examples include Flann O'Brien's comic masterpiece *At Swim-Two-Birds* and Gilbert Sorrentino's gargantuan *Mulligan Stew*. To this company must now be added Felipe Alfau's *Locos*. . . . Alfau's inventive "comedy of

gestures" is, like any hall-of-mirrors fun house, disorienting, maddening and greatly entertaining.

It has everything any modern best seller needs: murder, incest, fallen priests, lascivious nuns, a couple of suicides, several mysteries, the living dead, pimps and whores and poets, locales that shift from China to the Philippines to the Caribbean to Europe. The action, most of which occurs in or near Madrid, commingles the seemingly real and the clearly fantastic, with dashes of romance. Alfau's English is neat, often epigrammatic, continually ironic:

Fulano had come to this world with the undaunted purpose of being famous and he had failed completely, developing into the most obscure person. He had tried all possible plans of acquiring importance, popularity, public acknowledgement, etc., and the world with a grim determination persistently refused to acknowledge even his existence. . . . One day he stood in the middle of La Puerta del Sol shouting: 'Fire . . . Fire . . .' But no one seemed to hear him and at last he had to quit his post because a trolley car nearly ran him down. . . . Not even beggars approached him for alms.

Poor Fulano pops up in the first story of *Locos*, where he meets the author at the Café de los Locos, a bar where fictional characters hang out between assignments. (Don Quixote sits forlornly at one table.) Alfau gradually picks out some half dozen or so figures, who will be the protagonists of the interconnected tales in his book. Of course, Alfau himself appears in most of the stories, so the strands of fictional discourse already begin to twist into a Möbius strip, with characters who jump back and forth between "real" and "fictive" life.

For instance, in "A Character" Alfau sits down to write about Gaston Bejarano, who he admits is "quite a bad influence . . . and on more than one occasion has completely demoralized the cast." Before Alfau really gets started on his story though, he is interrupted by the supposedly fictional Don Laureano Baez—which allows the lightly sketched Gaston to go off on a spree: "Now that I am free from his attention I am able to do as I please." He proceeds to describe a romantic encounter late one night with Lunarito, Don Laureano Baez's "ward," an enigmatic seductress graced with an unforgettable beauty spot somewhere on her body: For one peseta you can see it, for two pesetas it can be touched, and for three pesetas . . .

In most fiction we are encouraged to surrender to the smooth surface of the storytelling, to follow the characters, even to identify with them, allowing the author's narrative skills to hypnotize us. We call this getting lost in a story. Alfau's esthetic is, by contrast, precisely the opposite of such illusionism: He does everything to call attention to the fact that what we are reading are fictions, artificial constructions. He pursues the novelistic equivalent of [Bertolt] Brecht's epic theater, where the actors play at their roles with casual detachment and may even gesture knowingly to an audience required to judge the action rather than simply swallow it.

For instance, at one point a barbaric adventurer known as