

COOPER RENNER

REVIEW: GONZALO CELORIO. *AND LET THE EARTH TREMBLE AT ITS CENTERS*. TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY DICK GERDES; FOREWORD BY RUBÉN GALLO. UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS. AUSTIN, TX, 2009. 152 PP. ISBN 978-0-292-71962-0.

Gonzalo Celorio's *And Let the Earth Tremble at Its Centers*, the first novel by the Mexican author to be published in English, is, to twist the title of the Neruda work mentioned in the text, both a love poem and a song of despair for Mexico City, at once a vibrant cultural center and a welter of poverty, overcrowding and filth. The morning after a drunken party celebrating his retirement, beloved professor Juan Manuel Barrientos Ahumada (the second surname means *smoked*) makes his way to the city center to keep a noon appointment with several of his students for one of his celebrated walking tours of downtown. Battling his ferocious, and not unusual, hangover with the hair of the dog, he has begun drinking again even before he realizes that, for some reason, none of the students is going to appear. He decides to make the tour anyway, drinking as he goes, and the novel becomes both an exploration of the immensely deep history imbedded in downtown Mexico City, the ancient Tenochtitlán of the Aztecs, and a not necessarily nostalgic look back at Barrientos's life. By deftly braiding the two strands together, Celorio makes each a metaphor for the other, triumph and tragedy, brilliance and decadence, success and failure. The ubiquity of the Church balances against that of the raw sexuality of strip clubs and lap dances. Celebrated architectural masterpieces, weathered and worn, overlook plazas littered with trash and feces, and inhabited by beggars and thieves. Celorio also employs a peculiarly fluid autho-

rial stance, which not only floats back and forth between the professor's stream of consciousness and a more traditional realistic narrative, but also turns to address him directly: "How many hours of your life have you spent sitting in front of mirrors at bars, alternating one foot or the other on the barstool rung, staring at your reflection, rebuffing it at times, and at other times, doting on it with tenderness? Tell me, how many hours has it been? If you dared to add them up, they would become days, weeks, months, and even years." (p. 29) In this way Celorio's style becomes itself another metaphor, a literary voice which moves between the approaches of different eras, one interwoven with another, even as twentieth century restaurants and shops reinvigorate (or degrade) eighteenth century edifices or even as the tipsy fifty-something Barrientos on his stumbling journey is also, in his reveries, an adolescent encountering sex for the first time or a not-quite-middle-aged professor whose beloved dies unexpectedly. Violence and the suggestion of violence hang over the novel, even though its protagonist is a respected intellectual, including the repeated image—real or metaphoric?—of a dead man in Barrientos's closet when he rises that morning. Foreboding and foreshadowing, sometimes too obvious, make their dwelling in these pages, and the reader keeps turning the pages, perhaps eager for, as much as dreading, the end result of the professor's drunken and careless celebration. Gerdes's translation steps nimbly from a more refined tone ("Absences are never illusory, Alejandra.") to contemporary slanginess ("Don't be stupid, dumb ass..."), reading like an original English composition. All in all, a fine introduction of Celorio to the English-reading audience.