

Cracked Lyricism

Manuel Puig, the Argentine author best known for "Kiss of the Spider Woman," writes novels that contrast the cramped lives people lead with the extravagant worlds they fantasize. A bitter romantic, he's a fan of classic Hollywood schlock, and his theme is the attraction and impossibility of romance. He can't get ideal love out of his head, and he can't forget that it doesn't really exist. When he recounts a character's movie-fed memory or dream, his words seem to issue from an ecstatic trance. He takes off from kitsch into something almost visionary, and makes us understand the lure of Dream Factory illusions. When Puig is at his peak—in "Kiss," "Betrayed by Rita Hayworth" and "Heart-break Tango," and in sections of his newly translated *Pubis Angelical* (250 pages. Vintage. Paper \$6.95)—his cracked, intense lyricism is in a class with that of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Tennessee Williams.

"Pubis Angelical" is like a jangled parody of a Hollywood weepie. A young woman being treated for a tumor awaits her doctor's verdict and contends with a lover who wants her to participate in a kidnapping scheme. Sedated against pain, she slips into comalike states. The narrative alternates between her lucid periods and two ongoing reveries—one starring Hedy Lamarr, the other a sex surrogate. Puig tells the "real" story in a bare-bones style and recounts the hallucinations—in which his heroine's deepest feelings play themselves out on a grand scale—in breathless, purple prose. The lush, piled-on sentences seem to change shape and take on their own life, like dream images: he describes "columns which widened little by little as they rose, suddenly to be transformed into the folds of the golden fabric wrapped around hips that continued into torsos of smiling women of gold, which, with extravagant humor, held up a golden ceiling with their coiffures of infinite curls."

The novel has more intellectual machinery than it can support, and the framing story is dramatically immobile. But some of the episodes that take place in the heroine's head can affect you as directly as music. And Puig's whipped-cream prose in these passages has an absurd, touching overripeness that may remind you of the insides of gaudy movie palaces. Puig can make the pull of the ideal so hard to resist that he gets you wondering if the clichés of old Hollywood might really be the language of pure feeling.

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