

he “understood that the only revenge, the only memento, and also the only possibility to forget and to forgive consisted in telling what happened, and nothing more.” It was some twenty years before Abad was able to write this memoir. The key to the memoir’s triumph is Abad’s deft handling of memory. The paramilitary’s violence succeeds and soccer continues to serve as “the opiate of the people,” the work suggests, because memory or the act of remembering does not occupy a higher plane than it currently does. That is why the right wing held society hostage in the 1960s (when the author was a child) and repeated its exercise in the 1980s without massive resistance. The work’s title, *Oblivion*, is best captured by Mejía Vallejo’s speech at the father’s funeral: “We live in a county that forgets its best faces, its best impulses, and so life will go on. . . .”

Adele Newson-Horst  
Morgan State University

Robert Murray Davis. **Born Again Skeptic and Other Valedictions.** Norman, Oklahoma. Mongrel Empire. 2011. ISBN 9780983305248

Robert Murray Davis’s collection of personal essays, *Born Again Skeptic and Other Valedictions*, opens with a piece titled “Is This an Autobiography?” The short answer to that question is yes—the essays are for the most part autobiographical. However, the threads woven through the book tell far more than just one man’s experiences; they offer insight into the American condition: the arc of our recent, collective history as well as the trajectory of an individual life. Davis, who taught English at the

University of Oklahoma for thirty-plus years, covers an array of topics ranging from memories of his parents to his ambivalent relationship with Catholic theology to literature, books, and academia. Sociopolitical issues and broken relationships are also frequent—and sometimes parallel—subjects.

These are not personal essays bursting forth from (mis)adventures, as in the vein of David Foster Wallace’s “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again,” but they do provide a glimpse into man-and-moment in a similar fashion. In “Borders,” Davis employs a dark humor to discuss the demographics of Sun Lakes, a community for “mature adults” where he has retired in the rogue state of Arizona. Bordering the Gila River Indian Community, Sun Lakes is divided into sections that seem based on class—in various senses of the word. One resident tells him, “You might be able to find a woman in Phase I who lives the way you do. My new cleaning woman lives in Phase I. She’s sleeping with my yard man.” The Phoenix-area borders Davis addresses are both geopolitical and psychological, and he sees a sad state of affairs in Arizona and beyond: “As long as we are mobile, we are less bound by geography and environment, believing more or less unconsciously like Hemingway in *Green Hills of Africa* that when a country is used up, we can move to another one.”

While many of the essays in *Born Again Skeptic* balance humor and charm with memory and critical analysis, some are much more serious in tone. For example, “Dry & High” is the literally sobering tale of Davis’s abrupt, cold-turkey end to his

## Nota Bene



Jean-Philippe Toussaint

### Reticence

John Lambert, tr.

Dalkey Archive

What starts as a simple vacation to visit a friend soon leads to a mystery involving a missing person and the strange appearance of a dead black cat. The narrator describes his search for truth while curbing his growing sense of paranoia. Belgian author Toussaint is the author of nine other novels.



Esther Tusquets

### Seven Views of the Same Landscape

Barbara F. Ichiishi, tr.

Host

*Seven Views* consists of a series of delicately rendered vignettes set in postwar Barcelona, each told from the perspective of a young girl whose family belongs to the Catalan upper-middle class. All the joys, sorrows, and discoveries of coming-of-age are brought to life in the author’s lyrical prose.

drinking—an act that appears at first to be entirely for the good but which turns out to be the trigger for an avalanche of hard times, including a divorce. A few essays, such as “Cousins,” may not connect with many readers because the subjects seem too personal, but others, including “Dry & High,” succeed specifically for that reason.

The book is divided by theme into five sections: “Roots,” “Routes,” “Recoveries,” “Discoveries,” and “Valedictions.” The essays in the final section often do feel like recollections in preparation for farewells, or valedictions, but Davis does not call this book an ending in terms of his writing. As he notes in “Twentieth Century Man,” “I’m now beyond the Biblical three score and ten, beyond the twentieth century. . . . I’m free, then, to move and write any way I want to—or can—in but not defined by the twenty-first century.”

*Twister Marquiss Gillette, Wyoming*

Christopher Domínguez Michael. **Critical Dictionary of Mexican Literature (1955-2010)**. Lisa M. Dillman, tr. Champaign, Illinois. Dalkey Archive. 2012. ISBN 978-1564786067

Widely recognized as one of the finest Latin American essayists and as a trenchant critic of world literatures, Christopher Domínguez Michael is also an influential cultural historian. A master stylist, he is particularly adept at fathoming the essential values of contemporary Mexican literature. His *Critical Dictionary of Mexican Literature*—extending from Rulfo’s masterpiece, *Pedro Páramo*, to the

present, as his prologues explain—evinces his gifts.

To Dillman’s great credit, all 526 pages read like those of the 2007 original (revised and enlarged), quirks and turns of phrase included. Unimpeded by abstruse theories or stringently biographical apprehensions, this work is brilliantly direct and commonsensical. Above all, Domínguez Michael provides a cohesive view of a literariness heretofore addressed in individual native sources, founding his sophisticated Baedeker (not reader, encyclopedia, companion, or biographical dictionary) on correspondingly advanced readings of literature largely undiscovered in English.

Those qualities are manifest when he writes about canonical, unheralded, or promising authors. Carlos Fuentes is “a Methuselah who turned each of his years into eons and each of his novels into a prolonged agony.” On Alfonso Reyes: “It is doubtful that his classicizing endeavors managed to ‘civilize’ Mexicans.” Zelig-like in providing context, Domínguez Michael doesn’t leave readers feeling that there is a larger story to be written, i.e., that Mexican “hit lit” (Laura Esquivel, Michael Angeles Mastretta) deserves a word or two. He expounds on Ana García Bergua, Cristina Rivera Garza, and many other women with admiration and respect, while Guillermo Fadanelli merits three paragraphs. His sympathies and differences are evident.

Recovering underestimated novelists, the Joycean Daniel Sada is “the author of the most difficult book in Mexican literature,” and Enrique Serna’s historical picaresque, *Ángeles del abismo*, reads

doubly beautifully because it took to heart the task of inventing, not reconstructing, seventeenth-century New Spain. In addition, he boldly puts in perspective, with equanimity, Elena Poniatowska’s ultimate worth: “limited by her journalism, which always ends up interfering with her fiction.” For him, Elena Garro “is the twentieth century’s great Mexican writer, the only one whose work could possibly make up for the chaos and bitterness of her errant intellect.”

For those who read Domínguez in prestigious periodicals and newspapers, his views will be consistent. Pulling no punches, he never overpromises or underdelivers. Thus his views on Jorge Volpi, contextualized by expounding on “Crack” writers’ inordinate self-promotion: “The preposterous idea that there was now some sort of ‘new’ Mexican novel, simply because in it there was no mention of Mexico or Mexicans was feted by the generally obtuse Madrid journalists’ [. . .] ignorance about Latin American literary universalism, which writers like [Padilla] have made the most of.”

He analyzes numerous foreign-born authors, mainly Spaniards (Cernuda), Guatemalans (Monterroso), Colombians (García Márquez, Vallejo), a Chilean (Bolaño), and others like Alejandro Rossi whose careers made them avatars of Mexican culture. But the worldly heretic Mexican templates are Octavio Paz, Salvador Elizondo, Juan García Ponce, Rosario Castellanos, Carlos Monsivais, José Emilio Pacheco, Jorge Ibarguengoitia, Martín Luis Guzmán, Heriberto Yépez, and Gabriel Zaid. This catholicity and generic noncompliance, which also