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From Geography to Poetry: A Braudelian Comparative Literary History of Latin America

In 1958 Fernand Braudel wrote that the human sciences were in a state of crisis; history and geography had reached such an impasse that a divorce was imminent. It is significant to take account of the sense of the discipline Braudel had by 1963 when he wrote the preface to the second revised edition of the *Mediterranean* which in part responds to the problematics he cited in "Histoire et sciences sociales, la longue durée." In the second edition he writes:

the basic approach around which the whole work is structured, the dialectic of space and time (geography and history) ... I have felt obliged to give more space to economics, political science, a certain idea of civilization and a more detailed demographic study.... The basic problem, however, remains the same. It is the problem confronting every historical undertaking. Is it possible somehow to convey simultaneously both that conspicuous history which holds our attention by its continual and dramatic changes — and that other, submerged, history, almost silent and always discreet, virtually unsuspected either by its observers or its participants, which is little touched by the obstinate erosion of time? This fundamental contradiction, which must always lie at the centre of our thought, can be a vital tool of knowledge and research. (16)

This sense of history is the starting point of our endeavour.

Since the immediate post-war years, French historiography has led the way in bringing the social sciences into social history. This enrichment of inquiry is nowhere more in evidence than in such achievements as Braudel's own *Mediterranean in the Age of Philip II*, as well as in the counter movement of historicizing geography. In *Géographie Universelle. Amérique latine*, Bataillon *et al.* provide the perfect counterpoint to Braudel's historical dialectic of space and time from the perspective of the geographer.

Unfortunately, with a few notable exceptions, the general area of literary and art history has remained marginal to this interdisciplinary expansion in social history. The reasons for this isolation have been multiple, not least of which has been the literary historian's disinterest in the social contextualization of literature. The great exceptions are clearly Stephen Greenblatt and Robert Weimann. In his ground breaking book, *Structure and Society in Literary History*, Weimann

presents an outline of the historical dialectic in his terms as past significance and present meaning. Among Greenblatt's numerous contributions to the debate and rethinking of literary history *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* is exemplary of the refiguration of the historical context that we are undertaking.

The compliment has been repaid by the social historian who has rarely considered the role of literature in the making of cultural identity. Braudel, as usual, rises above such limitations. In his description of the battle of Lepanto in the *Mediterranean* (1126) he cites from *Don Quixote* to insert a sense of the chaos of battle. And with regard to Portugal's self-image he stresses the significance of letters: "in Lisbon 'em casa de Antonio Goça Luez,' an unknown writer, called Camoëns, was bringing out the *Lusiads*, a book of maritime adventures which embraced that great and faraway Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean of Portuguese enterprise" (1124).

When we read a message, the extent of our understanding can be measured by the fullness of our appreciation of the context in which the statement was made and the relative accessibility we have to it. The context of literature can be characterized as a complex dialectic of expressive systems. The fundamental characteristic of this context, however, is that it is a dynamic exchange, a temporally marked intersection of referential systems and, as such, cannot be fixed or reduced to a determinate configuration. Thus it is that we can say that the reading and writing of literature is a normatively regulated, communicative action with an argumentative handling of truth-claims. It is precisely the argumentative handling of truth-claims that serves the community in the ongoing process of cultural identity. This communicative action takes place in the community and in a specific sociolinguistic context, but is always bringing into the community as many truth-claims from other communities as it is re-describing its own. So it is that the cultural intertext has become an essential part of the interpretation of the literary aspect of cultural identity.

Meaning, in the social and historical context of texts, is a dynamic encounter, a crossing and crisscrossing of referential operations. An interpretation that pulls out of the dynamic event is nothing less than an arbitrary reduction of meaning to the position of understanding where the interpreter happened to be when he or she broke off. The question, therefore, is how can we discuss a dynamic and unpredictable event of contextual meaning without imposing closure. My preliminary response is that the historical explanation and interpretation I propose is a phenomenological examination of the production and the reception of texts rather than the historicist promotion of an abstract construct arbitrarily designated as an accurate determination of the work itself in its original context. Reductionist interpretations are the result of one or two referential operations taken out of context by historians and put forth as fixed, and definitively accurate expositions of the work's meaning and its place in a chronological inventory of

literary works. In place of the master narrative of a compendium of national master narratives, what I propose as comparative literary history is an open network, completely cross-referenced, of intersecting narratives that the reader will play out as historical hypertext.

Cultural identity can no longer remain a construction of narrowly conceived precepts of political nationalism. The more a reflective community engages in the contemporary electronic age of instant global communication the more will it become open to other horizons of understanding and reject the violent separation of peoples along ethnic, religious and linguistic grounds, but the pervasive practice of decontextualization remains the hallmark of the unreflective who are the victims of well known notions of xenophobia. Literature makes up an important part of cultural identity in a direct manner through institutions of cultural diffusion and indirectly by the reinsertion of literary truth-claims into the sociolinguistic fabric of the community. But nothing can be more contradictory than the traditional notion of political identity versus the reality of cultural identity in a specific community. The persons who make up a community have multiple relations within the community and outside of it, but the fundamental characteristic of cultural identity is that these people cohabit the same space whether it be a modern megalopolis like Mexico City or a village like San Juan Chamula (Chiapas).

My concept of cultural identity is that of a dynamic identity, an identity that has a center, but it is a moving center. Dynamic cultural identity is a changing horizon because it is, above all, a living set of ideas about the self, and the self's community. Without a doubt, the dynamic cultural identity of the United States, for example, draws from both logical identity and Platonic identity, but its parameters are constantly changing, as a detached observer can readily recognize. It follows that the very life force in a dynamic concept of cultural identity comes from ideas that are proposed, contested, accepted, or negated about the self's relation to the community. The conflict of literary interpretations takes on particular issues, significant to the specific community, but because the fundamental stakes are common to all communities, cultural intertextuality traverses the world with such ease that McLuhan's global village becomes an appropriate historical indicator of our times.

We must now ask to what extent is it possible to respond to these ideas of dynamic cultural identities in literary history and, if this were not enough of a challenge, we must also ask whether these ideas have a place in a literary history of an area characterized by heterogeneity of languages, traditions, and ethnic composition as we find in Latin America.

In the comparative literary history project my colleague Djelal Kadir and I propose, within the general framework of comparative literary history, we examine the literary work in the context of the linguistic community where it has originated, but this examination is one of continuous cultural interchange (Valdés and Hutcheon). The movement of texts and ideas between linguistic communities

is so vast and so complex that the very idea of linguistic isolation today even for the tribes of the deep Amazon basin is patently absurd. My argument is that a literary history that can begin to address cultural intertextuality is a demographically informed comparative literary history that examines the various referential streams that make up the reality of cultural communication.

In comparative literary history, as we have described it, literary works are recast as historical events within a dynamic cultural context. This undertaking, of necessity, reexamines and redefines fundamental historiographic blind spots such as cultural space, institutional promotion or suppression of literature and the politics of participation in the literary/historical event and also questions the basic assumptions of historical narrative: the narrative time frame and narrative authority.

Our plan calls for the elaboration of the framing context separately from the narration of events. This is the essence of the Braudel model as we have adapted it to literary history. The social context thus redresses some of the omissions of the past and allows us to introduce specific conceptual schema such as the cultural centers of a society, the social institutions which have been central to the production of literature and also the politics of readership in the community.

In place of periodization based on either empirical evidence — dates of birth and death of writers, publication dates, etc. — or on interpretive aspects of the works — late romantic prose or neo-classical drama, etc. — we propose time-frames of reception in which the specific works of literature are examined as those mobile attractors of cultural forces — e.g., *The Araucana* as a new historical text or Sarmiento's *Facundo* as a twentieth-century argument of Spanish American identity.

There is, however, no getting around the basic fact that narrativization imposes a sense of order and this in turn implies purpose which, without question, imposes closure on the historical events under scrutiny. The question of narrative authority is not only linked to the multiple truth-claims the historical narrative proposes to the reader, but primarily on the historian's explication of causality. The exercise of narrative authority is more explicit in nineteenth century history, e.g. the first volumes of Michelet's *Histoire de la Révolution française* (1847-1862), but it is present in all historical narration. Chantal Thomas, for example, takes the publication of Sade's *Justine* in the summer of 1791 as a historical event in the sense in which we have been using the term. In her commentary she proposes specific contextual conclusions: "Sade adheres to Enlightenment ideology, but, unlike Denis Diderot and Paul Henri Thiry d'Holbach, for whom materialism means the improvement of human nature, Sade's thought results in an absolute conviction in the permanent existence of evil" (580).

There are, of course, numerous ways of narrating the same set of historical markers which have been taken as an event since each historian has to select and

sort out the evidence, organize it into a narrative sequence, and give it a sense of purpose. The more the series of events take on importance the more will the historical narratives of these events multiply and differ from each other. In all of these versions, each historian will have implicitly claimed to be presenting "what really happened in the past." Each historical narrative has in fact given form and coherence to an assemblage of data. The demand for closure in the historical narrative is a demand for an interpretive statement of purpose behind the event. Our task is made more complex because we are dealing with multiple social and demographic factors, sometimes of long duration.

Narrativization in comparative literary history expresses direction and purpose and, consequently, maps out a quasi plot for the events, but because of stratified paradigms, these proposals are advanced within specific schematic units, drawing from the wealth of data offered in the framing social context and are presented as interpretive variations.

In summary, the cultural space of Latin America consists of a geography and its cultural centers that have been the sources of cultural production; these cities have, over the centuries, produced not only local identity, they have participated in larger national and transnational formations of identity. Any account of the diversity of the cultural centers must consider the continental historical continuity which functions in spite of logical, political and ethnic limitations. The narration of the literary works as historical events concentrates on the cultural function of these texts. If, for example, we examine the terms of historical unity for Latin American literature, we must recognize that it is completely a construction of literary historians, and yet there is an undoubted referent in the social reality of the continent. The reasons for the apparent paradox are entirely tied to problematics of identity. In the vaguely defined area encompassed by the term Latin America, the aspects held in common are languages and a colonial past. Within the area, the term Latin America is an important, but secondary, identity factor. Outside the area it has become a primary factor rather than a secondary one. Nevertheless it is quite clear that the main identity factor in this area is a combination of place of origin and language. Thus it is that irrespective of the name used, the Spanish speaking majority exclude English and French speaking people of the Caribbean and only partially include Portuguese-speaking Brazil. Neither language alone nor place of origin is sufficient, for Spain and Portugal are not accepted as part of any identity paradigm of the area.

Consequently, it should be clear that the referent of Latin America, as weak and diffuse as it is, cannot in itself constitute the basis for a comprehensive study of the literary production of the area as a distinct world category. Furthermore, the ethnic make up of this area covers the full spectrum from ethnic homogeneity in villages, urban centers of extensive *mestizaje* in Mexico, Bolivia, Paraguay and Peru, as well as Cuba and the Dominican Republic and others like most of Argentina and Uruguay that are almost entirely made up of a population of

European origin. Also, it must be remembered that the colonial past of Spain and Portugal diverge markedly after the first settlements. Spain was intent on founding an empire with full centralized control in Madrid; Portugal had neither the resources nor the ambition of empire.

Therefore, it should be made clear that a comparative literary history of Latin America cannot be a composite of national literary histories nor a catalogue of Latin American born writers, but rather a comparative instrument that establishes the contextualization for interpretations, keeps this context open and offers some, among many, interpretations of the most significant works of the continent.

In Latin American literary history, period concepts have usually been taken from political history in a largely unreflective continuation of national histories. Thus we begin with a pre-conquest period of various lengths depending on the extent and richness of these years in the country in question. It is followed by a somewhat shorter period of conquest and early colonization, normally taking up the sixteenth century. The so-called colonial period is by default everything in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries bounded by the conquest on one side and independence on the other. The nineteenth century is the period of independence and nationalism and the twentieth century is treated as one of Latin American postcolonial expansion. These periods and the period concept in spite of their deep rooted establishment are not relevant to our project. Of course, the historical events of conquest, foundations, independence, etc. remain, but they are no longer the signposts designating a historical period. The pace of development of the cultural centers are dictated more by social and economic factors than by political decisions about peace and war and the arbitrary ceding of land from one European power to another. The Latin American institutions that controlled access and participation of the cultural centers also responded to other motives which were largely ideological like the counter-reformation, and others which were economic and demographic like the massive insertion of African slaves into the still small communities of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Finally, the narration of the significant works in Latin America bears little resemblance to the purported national periods of history.

In place of periodization based on either empirical evidence or interpretive internal aspects of the works, we propose an extensive contextualization informed by the development of social institutions that control access in which the specific works of literature are examined as the attractors of cultural forces that in turn create ideas, images and, ultimately, dialogue about the world we live in.

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