A Hermeneutic Model for Comparative Literary History

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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 irnminent.[1] In the intervening years French historiography has led the way in bringing the social sciences into social history. This enrichment of inquiry is in evidence in such achievements as Braudel's own *Mediterranean in the Age of Philip II* and, more recently, in Claude Bataillon's work and that of his collaborators in the geography of Latin America.[2]

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 Iiterature.[3]

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* (1972, 1126) he cites from *Don Quijote* 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 *Lusiad,* a book of rnaritime adventures which embraced that great and faraway Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean of Portuguese enterprise» (1124).

This essay aims to address the issues and problems which correspond to the rewriting of literary history comparatively as social reality. The thesis I propose

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will be presented in five parts: 1) an inquiry into the concept of historical context, 2) definition of terms for a comparative literary history, 3) methodological frameworks for comparative literary historiography, 4) putting theory into practice, and 5) inconclusive conclusions.

1. An inquiry into the concept of historical context

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. 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.

There are powerful forces of xenophobia which inhibit peaceful cohabitation and, as we know only too well, can provoke alienation into open hostility. Although this is true of urban centers, both large and small in all parts of the world, it would be an error to think that there is no sense of identity in these areas. They can be seen as veritable crucibles of the construction of identity of cultural space.

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 it is 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, for example, areas of the world like Latin America.

In comparative literary history we examine the literary text in the context of the linguistic community where it has originated, but this examination is one of continuous cultural interchange. 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 the 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 paradigm 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 Tempest* as a new historical text, *Don Quijote* as a twentieth century definition of Spanish identity in Unamuno, Ortega y Gasset and Azorín. Denis Hollier has put it succinctly in his «Introduction» to *A New History of French Literature:* «Today it is increasingly difficult to draw one solid line of demarcation between the inside and the outside of a work of art; sometimes it is even impossible to distinguish between form and background» (1989, XXV).

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 to 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» (1989, 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 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 our contextual frame paradigm, 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. It is somewhat like the reading of a hypertext. The text is read in conjunction with a number of other related texts in an almost limitless variety of possible historical configurations. The only limitations lie in the historicity of the reader and the skill, imagination and representational repertoire of the time.

The literary work of art as a historical event is a complex undertaking for we can clearly recognize that composition and reception can be taken as five distinct events: 1) the literary work at the time of composition as seen only in the documents contemporary to the work; 2) the work at the time of composition reconstructed by the historian; 3) the work as revealed through analytical means developed posterior to the work (e.g. a semiotic analysis of *La Celestina*); 4) the literary work received through the aesthetic perspectives of later periods (e.g. our reading of the German romantic reevaluation of Spanish seventeenth century theatre, and, especially, the works of Calderón de la Barca); and 5) the work of literature interpreted through posterior critical ideologies (e.g. Marxist, feminist interpretations of *Lazarillo de Tormes, Don Quijote,* and other works from the past).

These distinctive aspects of the literary work arise because we want to look at it as a historical event. In this plan of study the work as an original composition is part of the schema of the development of cultural centers. Of a somewhat more limited venue in the schema are the aesthetic reevaluations of the past. The historical narrative thus reconstructs both composition and reception. The analysis of the work is a recent addition to this schema of historical narration, but it is the ideological aspect of the reinterpretation of a

work that is of primary significance to the schema that examines social participation in the making of culture.

In summary, the cultural space of Latin America, for example, consists of the various cultural centers that have been the sources of cultural production; these cities have, over the centuries, produced not only the local identity, they have participated in larger national and transnational formations of identity. Comparative literary history penetrates the diversity of the centers and gives continental historical continuity which functions in spite of logical, political and ethnic limitations. The culminating aim of this literary history is a grid of narrations of the literary works as historical events and concentrates on the multiple cultural functions of the texts within the historical hypertext.

If, for example, we examine the terms of historical unity for Latin American literature, we must recognize that it is entirely 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 are 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 this continent.

In Latin American comparative 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 irrelevant for 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 still 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.

2. Definition of terms for a comparative literary history

One of the aspects of literary history that has consistently been queried over the centuries is the concept of the literary as a distinct kind of composition. Over the years the boundaries of the literary have been expanded or contracted. Expansion has meant going beyond the bounds of imaginative writing to include many other categories of discourse, factual as well as fictional, oral as well as written, popular as well as elite. This broader and non-normative concept of literature is not unique to the present time, but it has been theoretically examined in our time as never before.

This expansion of the corpus to be considered not only radically changes our sense of kinds of literature that are part of literary history, but also places enormous pressure on a fuller construction of the historical context. We have now reached a major turning point in literary historiography. History has become a configuration of histories of both production and reception. Without abandoning the historiography of literary production we must today add, with equal rigour, a consideration of the nature of literary reception. The field where literary experience occurs is as much a part of literary history as is the traditional study of the development of genres or thematic motifs. For this reason economic, political and social perspectives on issues like race or gender must be considered in the making of literary history in ways different than they might have been treated in the past.

What is at stake in this move from the traditional model of a literary history to the proposed comparative one can be best described by analogy. In the introduction to the translation of the first volume of his *Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Century,* Fernand Braudel described his project as comparative, as moving dialectically between past and present, between concrete observation and an awareness of the heterogeneity and complexity of life (1981, 25). A contextualized comparative literary history not only works within this dialectic hermeneutic movement between past and present, but also tries to do something analogous to what Braudel and the Annales school have done in shifting the historical focus from the political events to the consideration of demographic and geographic circumstances which condition such events and, further, includes a detailed examination of the concrete material data of life in the past. A comparative literary history, as we envisage it, treats life as it is told rather than Braudel's project of studying life as it is lived. Just as Braudel's *Mediterranean* brought together such diverse elements as religion, history, geography, technology, agriculture and the intellectual trends of a particular place at a specific time, the comparative literary history we propose will study literature in contexts beyond the aesthetic and formal, taking into account the relevant political, anthropological, economic, geographic, demographic and sociological research in constructing the contexts of a community's literature.

In his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* Benedict Anderson argues that nationhood is a matter of «imagined community.» In Europe the sense of collective identity was conceived in the nineteenth century and was born largely out of the printed word and the novel. This intertwining of the literary truth-claims and nationalism is also a part of a comparative literary history but with an openness to the contentions of imagined communities based on language or geography rather than the political boundaries of a nation. Either of these factors highlights the artificiality of national borders as valid limits of culture or identity. Even a cursory view of a

historical atlas will show how such borders have changed often within a generation.

We must further stress that a narrow construction of national literary history not only excludes the literature of those working on the borders and in other languages but also in other cultural traditions, thus perpetuating a culture of alienation. Further to this point is the obvious fact that people can and often do participate in several language communities at once; texts, as well as ideas and images, pass from one language to another through the medium of translation. Films are released in many languages at the same time, novels are simultaneously published around the world in translation, plays are performed on several continents in different languages. We suggest that comparative literary history is the history both made possible and demanded by our age of international information access and electronic technology.

3. Methodological frameworks for comparative literary historiography

Fernand Braudel called his own historical work comparative not only because it crossed traditional disciplinary boundaries, but because it involved what he called the «dialectic of past and present.» Similarly, the literary history we have put forward is the history of the past as read through the present. It cannot be simply a cumulative record of all that has been written or performed or even a compilation of themes or forms. The literary past, that is, the past of both literature's production and its reception, is unavoidably interpreted in the light of the present and present knowledge of it will therefore be partial and provisional, but not insignificant. A comparative literary history has to acknowledge the epistemological limitations that its hermeneutic situation creates: each historian will be situated as a real person living in a linguistic and cultural community, and it is from that specific position that he/she can engage what phenomenologists call the horizon of the past. The texts of that past were created by people in a specific language, at a specific moment, in a specific place; but the literary historian is also a historical being, situated with similar particularity. The community of readers of any text, as Hans-Georg Gadamer argued, is historically constituted but is never limited to its creator's contemporaries.

This hermeneutic foundation of a situated literary history is only one of the ways in which there is a dialectic of past and present. As the work of Hayden White has shown, it is in the present that the historian shapes and orders the events of the past, making meaning more than recording it. History's explanatory or narrative emplotments, to use Hayden White's term, are never innocent or without consequence. To admit any of this is to challenge the cognitive status of historical knowledge as it had come to be known in empirical and positivist terms in the last century. The major philosophical breakthrough for historical

hermeneutics has come from Paul Ricoeur's three-volume *Time and Narrative* with its carefully argued study of human temporality through narrative emplotment, both historical and fictive. Ricoeur's work has provided the necessary bridge between the cognitive challenges faced by historians and those that confront the literary scholar as historian. Literary history is also a narrativizing of literary events and its archive is a textualized one in only a more immediate self-evident way than is the archive of all historiography.

The historical record as a constituted rendering of the past, in our case the literary past, has come under close scrutiny in the wake of post-structural and postcolonial critiques that point to discontinuities, gaps, ruptures and, above all, exclusions rather than linear development, evolution or continuity. In short, today, the very task of the historian has to be rethought. In White's words: «a specifically historical inquiry is born less of the necessity to establish that certain events occurred than of the desire to determine what certain events might mean for a given group, society or culture's conception of its present tasks and future prospects» (1986, 487). This shift from validation to signification has also created an impetus to reconceptualize the literary historical process to include the relations between texts and the contexts of production and of reception. The key question of historiography is also the question of literary history: How did a given phenomenon enter the system entitled history? The historian, of course, names and constitutes an assemblage of data as an event by selection and narrative positioning. And this constitution of the past is carried out by historians who are as situated in the particularities of time, place, language and gender as were the people who first produced the works being considered. It is in this sense that we recall Nietzsche's words: you can explain the past only by what is most powerful in the present. This observation must not be construed as anti-historical, quite the opposite purpose will emerge: the writing of hermeneutic history.

In literary history theorists as diverse as Robert Weimann, Ralph Cohen and Claudio Guillén, have shown the ways in which events of the past have been ordered and given meaning in the present. In openly confronting the dialectic of past and present a comparative literary history, such as we are proposing, would foreground these methodological frameworks and directly address assumptions regarding texts and contexts. How this might work in practice may become clearer if we turn to the most fully articulated of the projects.[4] With contributors living in many countries and doing their research under radically different working conditions, it will also be clear why this is the kind of vast venture that can only be possible in an age of electronic communication among scholars and computer access to bibliographic sources previously unavailable to many.

4. Putting theory in practice

The first of the comparative literary history projects under way is the Latin American one. We begin by recognizing that in historical terms, Latin America as a name is a completely artificial construct. Yet we also recognize that there is a social and cultural dynamic throughout the continent that responds to the construct. In undertaking the historical consideration of both the production and the reception of Latin American literature, we are thus exploring an essential aspect of historical problematics that has arisen across national borders, geographic regions, time periods, linguistic systems, cultural traditions. The problem to be engaged is the fact that the Americas we call Latin are many, e.g. the Río de la Plata region, the Andean region, Brazil, the Caribbean, Mexico and Central America. The diverse discoveries, by different European imperial powers, of peoples who were never lost pose another set of problems to be scrutinized through the analysis of texts in both European and Indoamerican languages. The syncretic hybrid cultures that came with the colonial system reflected superimposition as well as widespread destruction. The demographic mass movements of people from Africa and within the Americas also left a stream of textual traces. The broader context, political, religious and social, in which literature is considered in this project is the principal challenge to the comparative literary historian.

There will clearly be no attempt to gain a comprehensive historical examination of a continent over more than five hundred years of conflictive history. Latin America is too diverse and multifaceted to permit such a synthesis. Nevertheless this literary history will inform all discussions of the main historical problematics and will insist in foregrounding the role of gender in all aspects of inclusion and exclusion to legitimation, and also a reflexive self-questioning that is central to our hermeneutic approach about the very terms and methods of analysis and explication used. A transcultural examination of the cultural centers of literary production, of the institutions with control over this production are followed by the narratives of literary events.

5. Inconclusive conclusion:

In full awareness of the current debates in historiography, and seeking to break new ground in literary history by creating a non-linear model we must draw upon experts in other fields like anthropology, sociology, geography, fine art, music, communications, economics and political science as well as history, and enlist them in our undertaking.

The proposed Latin American comparative literary history described here seeks not only to address specific instances of historical exclusions and inclusions, but to rethink the very categories of selection and ordering used in the writing of literary history. Literature does not exist in isolation from the culture

in which it is experienced, that is, the cultures in which it was produced as well as those in which it is received.

Notes

[1] 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.

[2] 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.

[3] 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.

[4] This paper is based in part on a position paper drafted in July 1993 at a working conference on comparative literary history held at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Study and Conference Center. The participants from twenty-three institutions in ten countries helped me in developing the general historiographic paradigm we hope to extend to other areas such as Central Europe. I am also indebted to my colleague Linda Hutcheon for her collaboration in the comparative literary history we have undertaken; her many remarks and queries have been incorporated into my text.

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