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DO THE AMERICAS HAVE A COMMON LITERATURE?

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Dialogue #94

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PREFACE

Gustavo Pérez Firmat is associate professor of the Department of Romance Languages at Duke University. He is the author of Idle Fictions: the Hispanic Vanguard Novel, 1926-1934 (Duke University Press), Literature and Liminality: Festive Readings in the Hispanic Traditions, and In Other Words: Translation as Cultural Practice in Modern Cuban Literature. His poetry has appeared in numerous anthologies and literary magazines, including Linden Lane Magazine, The Bilingual Review, Término, and Mariel.

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Richard Tardanico
Editor
Occasional Papers Series Dialogues

DO THE AMERICAS HAVE A COMMON LITERATURE?

¿Qué enigma entre las aguas?

Nicolás Guillén

My point of departure is the rather extravagant proposition that the New World is multilingual but unicultural. This is obviously a very large claim, and I will begin to trim it down by speaking only of literary culture and by limiting my discussion to U.S. and Spanish-American literature. My remarks, therefore, address the general field of inter-American or hemispheric comparative literary studies, a field that is itself something of a New World, one that only recently has begun to be the subject--or the victim--of serious scholarly forays.¹ Because comparative studies involving the literature of the Americas have primarily looked at the relationship between the New World and the Old, the lines of literary comparison have traditionally run east to west, with the result that the literary relations between North and South American literature have been for the most part neglected. Inter-American or pan-American comparatism remains a largely unexplored and uncharted field, and therefore opens up many new vistas and avenues of inquiry.

Since I am interested in finding ways of talking about the literatures of North and South America in a cohesive, unified way, I would like to share with you some ideas on how this might be done. The initial difficulty with such an enterprise is the striking and even bewildering diversity of New World literature. If the literatures of the Americas may be said to share a common ground, this ground at least is not immediately visible to the naked

eye. In 1924, for example, the Colombian novelist José Eustasio Rivera published La vorágine, one of the classics of modern Spanish-American fiction, and a work whose setting is an overwhelming, anthropomorphic jungle that devours the novel's protagonists. A few months later, several thousand miles to the North, Scott Fitzgerald published The Great Gatsby, which is set in the rather tamer environs of East Egg, New York. The differences between these contemporaneous works are large enough to discourage any attempt at a comparative study. To say that Rivera's and Fitzgerald's novels are continents apart is both literally and literarily exact. My point is that, if one wants to equate U.S. and Spanish-American literature, first one needs to find a way to commensurate the seemingly incommensurable. Said differently, one needs to introduce into the literary equation some sort of variable that will bring to light comparable authors, works, and literary movements.

I like to think of this variable in terms of frames, since what one has to do is frame the discussion in such a way that differences fade and similarities are thrown into relief. Now these frames can be of two kinds, spatial and temporal. Spatial frames allow one to isolate regions in the New World that may be geographically distant, but that share enough cultural or physical features to make their literatures comparable in productive and interesting ways. The tactic here is to break down the hemisphere into transnational fields so as to elaborate a kind of "field theory" of New World literature. So, even if The Great Gatsby and La vorágine are not comparable works, it may be possible to find other regions of the United States that reflect more closely the setting and atmosphere depicted in Rivera's novel; such a region might be, for instance, Faulkner's South, and if in my example we replace Gatsby with, say, The Bear (which was published

not too many years later), the equation begins to make sense. Another obvious example is the literature dealing, on the one hand, with the Argentine pampa, and on the other, with the North American Great Plains. According to Faustino Sarmiento, for example, the setting of Fenimore Cooper's The Prairie was so similar to the Argentinian countryside that, as Sarmiento put it in Facundo, Cooper's works seemed "plagiarized from the pampa."² Spatial frames are constituted, then, by taking geographical regions with similar characteristics and combining them into transnational fields. I should stress, though, that these shared characteristics need not be topographical. They may also be ethnic, for example, as would be the case if one decided to study Afro-American literature, or even linguistic, if one decided to focus on areas of the New World characterized by the prevalence of diglossia. (The assumption then would be that polyglot texts, regardless of the languages involved, share certain structural and thematic properties by virtue of their multilingualism.)

This first approach consists essentially in spatial positioning, in adopting a certain perspective. My second frame has to do not with space but with time. The enabling insight here is the recognition that U.S. and Spanish-American literature, and even specific genres within each literature, belong to different time curves, and that for this reason contemporaneous literary events do not necessarily happen at comparable points on the respective evolutionary curves. In Alejo Carpentier's Los pasos perdidos, as the protagonist voyages into the South American jungle in search of primitive musical instruments he realizes that, in the American hemisphere, a displacement in space may entail a displacement in time as well; he has only to travel two or three hours south of a modern metropolis like Caracas in order to find himself in the midst of the Paleolithic Era. When

attempting comparative studies of North and South American literature, it is essential to keep in mind these multiple time curves. The different parts of the American hemisphere have syncopated chronologies, and in order to fix on truly comparable moments one needs to allow for literary and cultural anachronisms.

My example of this phenomenon will be the American Renaissance and the Spanish-American Boom, periods that are widely separated in time but that address a similar set of issues having to do with cultural self-definition. As Bell Chevigny has put it, Renaissance and Boom share a common "interrogation of America" based on the search for what she has termed an "American hermeneutic."³ Following Chevigny's lead, I should like to posit that these two periods represent analogous moments of literary awakening, that occupy identical positions within their respective time curves. Some years ago Larzer Ziff published a fine book on the American Renaissance with the title, Literary Democracy: The Declaration of Cultural Independence in America. If such a book were to be written about Spanish-American literature, one would have to concentrate on twentieth-century rather than nineteenth-century literature, since the process of political and cultural decolonization that the United States underwent over a hundred years ago is only now taking place in Spanish America. So, the matching parts of the great contemporary Spanish-American novelists--Asturias, Carpentier, Fuentes, García Márquez--are not Mailer or Updike or Roth but Melville or Hawthorne or Emerson. Critics who insist on the incommensurability of the literatures of the Americas (like Roberto Fernández Retamar, to name one example) often do so from a synchronic perspective; that is, they look at contemporary texts and then underscore the obvious differences--as I did when I contrasted La vorágine and The Great Gatsby. What has to be

recognized, however, is that in the New World, and perhaps in the Old as well, simultaneous events do not necessarily happen at the same time, and a synchronic perspective may actually distort one's outlook by establishing a misleading contemporaneity.

Having said this much, I should now like to describe one possible way to fill in this particular frame. In so doing I want to go beyond generalities about literary democracy and cultural independence and devise a narrative, a kind of story that will help us perceive the similarities between Boom and Renaissance. In the early sixties Lewis Hanke published a volume of essays entitled Do the Americas Have a Common History?⁴ Hanke's history is the point of departure for my story, since my hypothesis (but at this point it is less a hypothesis than a hunch) is that the dominant imaginative model for the literature of both the American Renaissance and the Latin-American Boom is the discovery and colonization of the New World. In other words, the literature of the American Boom (and from now on I will use this hybrid expression to designate my conflation of the two periods) obsessively retells the initial chapters in the history of the New World. Since the existence of New World literature obviously presupposes the existence of the New World, this is a literature that habitually dramatizes its own conditions of possibility, one of whose principal themes is the literary uses of historical experience. Said differently, the story of the American Boom is precisely the story of story-making, the story of how history is turned into story, of how it is stored and storied. That the discovery of the New World should serve as the imaginative model for both the American Renaissance and the Spanish-American Boom is not surprising if we remember that the texts from these periods are the foundation of their respective literatures. That is to say, the American Renaissance and the Spanish-American Boom are the

cultural correlates of the discovery of the New World; they are the moments when American culture discovers itself, when it finds and founds its literary and cultural identity. It is hardly surprising then that the actual discovery of the New World provided the imaginative means with which to express this cultural awakening.

My story will assume the form of an elliptical narrative with three principal episodes or chapters, whose titles could well be Discovery, Foundation, and Estrangement. In their retelling of New World history, American texts of these periods return again and again to these three notions, which constitute something like the masterplot of the American Boom. In this three-part narrative there are two principal actors--person and place--and the three notions are defined with respect to them. That is to say, Discovery, Foundation and Estrangement establish variable relations between person and place. In Discovery, person comes upon place. In Foundation, place becomes property. And in Estrangement, person falls away from place. Discovery is placement, Foundation is emplacement, and Estrangement is displacement. As I have said, the narrative embedded in these episodes recapitulates the early history of the New World, and in fact my three-part scheme is an adaptation of James Fenimore Cooper's "stages of settlement," as he set them forth in Home as Found. Cooper's stages are defined by three representative types: the frontiersman, who comes upon and tames the wilderness and its barbarian inhabitants; the farmer, who sinks roots into the area cleared by the frontiersman; and the merchant or statesman, who represents the transition from a static, settled agrarian society to a mobile commercial civilization.⁵ In my scheme, the type of the frontiersman is the protagonist of episodes of Discovery; the type of the farmer

is the protagonist of episodes of Foundation; and the type of the merchant and the statesman is the protagonist of episodes of Estrangement.

Following this scheme, one can fit New World texts into three broad categories: they are tales of discovery, tales of foundation, or tales of estrangement. I should emphasize, however, that these three categories are not mutually exclusive, and that my separation of them is often belied by the texts themselves, where motifs of discovery, foundation, and estrangement co-mingle in intricate and interesting ways. Logically and chronologically, of these three categories, discovery comes first. A tale of discovery is one in which the principal action has to do with the accession to a terra incognita, be it a geographical terrain or a spiritual one. I like to think of this phenomenon by reference to the figure of Christopher Columbus, for one interesting symptom of this concern with discovery is the repetitive use of Columbus as a symbolic prototype. The literature of the American Boom is full of Columbus-figures, of characters defined by their urge to discover or explore and who are often explicitly linked to Columbus himself. In the poetry of Whitman, Columbus even becomes the prototype for the poet, since the poet, like the Genoese sailor, is a visionary, an explorer of the new world of the spirit. And Columbus himself appears with some frequency; in the literature of the American Renaissance, perhaps the best-known instances are a couple of poems by Whitman, "The Prayer of Columbus" and "Passage to India." But there are others: Washington Irving's three-volume biography of Columbus, Joel Barlow's epic poem The Columbiad, and a novel by James Fenimore Cooper--whose Natty Bumppo is one of those Columbus figures I was just talking about--entitled Mercedes of Castile. In contemporary Spanish-American literature, the best and best-known example of a work with Columbus as its actual protagonist is Alejo Carpentier's novel, El arpa y la

sombra, but one can also mention Antonio Benítez Rojo's El mar de las lentejas and Abel Posse's Los perros del paraíso.

The second moment is that of foundation. In order to explain my use of this term I will refer to my favorite foundation scene, which I take from Fenimore Cooper's The Prairie, one of the "Leatherstocking Tales." This scene, which occurs at the end of the novel, depicts the death of Cooper's hero, Natty Bumppo, who is here called Trapper (as you know Natty Bumppo is something of a protean figure who is known by a succession of nicknames--Leatherstocking, Hawk-eye, and Trapper).

The trapper had remained nearly motionless for an hour. His eyes alone had occasionally opened and shut. When opened, his gaze seemed fastened on the clouds which hung around the western horizon, reflecting the bright colors and giving form and loveliness to the glorious tints of an American sunset. The hour, the calm beauty of the season, the occasion--all conspired to fill the spectators with solemn awe. Suddenly, while musing on the remarkable position in which he was placed, Middleton felt the hand which he held grasp his own with incredible power, and the old man, supported on either side by his friends, rose upright to his feet. For a moment he looked about him as if to invite all in presence to listen (the lingering remnant of human frailty), and then, with a fine military elevation of the head and with a voice that might be heard in every part of that numerous assembly, he pronounced the word "Here!" (6)

If Discovery is characterized by the activity of the explorer or frontiersman, in Foundation the frontiersman becomes the squatter, Columbus becomes colonizer. The challenge of finding land recedes before that of founding upon it. Routes give way to roots, path-finding gives way to ground-breaking, and--following Cooper's scheme--we pass from the first to the second stage of settlement. In a foundation scene, person becomes rooted in place; consciousness of being merges with consciousness of locality.⁷

Natty Bumppo's final exclamation--"Here!"--embodies the place-consciousness that defines foundation. Although in Cooper's novels the Trapper is the paradigm of the frontiersman, by saying "Here!" the frontiersman

settles down, puts himself in his place, as it were. Asserting his pertinence to American soil, he becomes one with the land. It is significant that the quoted paragraph begins with a reference to motionlessness--"The trapper had remained nearly motionless for an hour." While Discovery is a time of movement, Foundation is an arresting moment, a time of emplacement, of being in place, in the full sense of the expression. The fact that even the restless, nomadic Natty finds need for this stopping-place shows how deeply the foundational impulse is seeded within us.

Moreover, Cooper's description of trapper's death suggests that foundation represents a triumph of relation over disconnectedness. The adverb "here" is an affirmation of relation, a relation that is established both with the people around him and with the land beneath him. Thus, in order to be able to speak, Trapper grasps Middleton's hand and stands supported by those near him. Discovery is an individual, and often an isolating enterprise, as is implied in Whitman's portrait of Columbus as a misunderstood, ostracized visionary. But it is different with foundation. Foundation is a moment of human community and natural communion. Trapper speaks loudly, says Cooper, so that his "voice might be heard in every part of that numerous assembly." Significantly, this assembly--and the term "assembly" itself signifies junction, convergence--includes pale-face and redskin, male and female, the young as well as the old. Incipient in foundation is the utopian vision of harmonious racial and social synthesis, a vision so often given eloquent voice in American texts, and whose exemplary instance is perhaps José Vasconcelos' influential essay, La raza cósmica.

Trapper's stentorian "Here!" captures a founding moment, and his last word will echo long and insistently in American literature. One hears it often in Emerson's essays: "Best swallow this pill of America which Fate

brings you & sing a land unsung. Here stars, here birds, here trees"; or: "Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Boston Bay you think paltry places, and the ear loves names of foreign and classic topography. But here we are, and if we tarry a little, we may come to learn that here is best." One hears it again at the beginning of Whitman's "Song of Myself":

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this
soil, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same.

Moving south, one hears it again in Neruda's "Alturas de Macchu Picchu":

Esta fue la morada, éste es el sitio:
aquí los anchos granos del maíz ascendieron
y bajaron de nuevo como granizo rojo.

Aquí la hebra dorada salió de la vicuña
a vestir los amores, los túmulos, las madres,
el rey, las oraciones, los guerreros.

Aquí los pies del hombre descansaron de noche
junto a los pies del águila.

One hears it also in the opening line of the opening poem of Nicolás Guillén's seminal book of Afro-Hispanic poetry, Sóngoro cosongo, whose "Aquí estamos" echoes Emerson's phrase. This does not mean, of course, that every "here" we may encounter in American texts is imbued with foundational impetus; it does mean that there is a certain species of "here" in American texts that, because of its context and intent, marks a foundational moment. And it seems to me that one way to trace the founding impulse in New World literature is to follow through time the echoes of Trapper's "Here," echoes that resonate in the most unexpected places, as for example in the last words of Steven Spielberg's movie, ET, which I am sure many of you will recall--"I'll be right here."

The last episode of my narrative is triggered by the realization that, since the earth moves, foundations are always frail and shifting, and the project of founding in the New World is beset with all sorts of

encumbrances. In this last moment the utopian vision of the second moment is replaced by a more pessimistic assessment of the relation between person and place, and foundational intimacy gives way to estrangement. Now estrangement, as the word suggests, signifies a collapse of relation, a distancing. "Here" is replaced by "there," and even by "nowhere." If at the moment of foundation the emigré becomes a resident, at the moment of estrangement the resident is seen for what he perhaps really is, a resident alien. Consequently, in a tale of estrangement one witnesses a separation of person and place. This separation, this displacement reverses the movement of discovery. In discovery, person meets place; in estrangement, person moves away from place. In one case it is a matter of finding your place; in the other, of losing it.

The paradox, however, is that this displacement results from the desire to root oneself more deeply by linguistic appropriation. After appropriating a place through foundation, the next step is to appropriate linguistically by making a record of the appropriation; here is where language intervenes, and where it proves insufficient. In New World literature, language is an agent of alienation, of distancing. (And here it is pertinent to mention that Cooper's merchant and statesman both practice language-bound professions, professions in which negotiation and documentation play an important part.) The reason for this is obvious but profound. As Octavio Paz pointed out in a provocative section of Los hijos del limo, one common characteristic of the literatures of the New World is that they are all written in transplanted tongues. Because in the Western Hemisphere the languages of literary discourse are, almost without exception, of European origin, the New World writer is never fully at home in his speech. His mother tongue is always a foreign tongue, a tongue that did not emerge from

the reality which it now tries to name. As Juan Marinello once put it, "Somos a través de un idioma que es nuestro siendo extranjero." The result of this linguistic antinomy is an irreducible distance between word and thing.

As you may remember, in García Márquez's Cien años de soledad it turns out at the end that the novel we have been reading is actually a chronicle written by Melquíades, the gypsy seer, but a chronicle written in Sanskrit. The fact the Melquíades' parchments were written in Sanskrit may be taken as an emblem of the linguistic predicament of the New World. Like the last Aureliano Buendía, the American writer must discover his fate in a foreign tongue. But this means that he can never really find himself, that whatever image of himself and his world he may construct, it has to be expressed in a language that is in some measure inappropriate to the task. In one of the passages I quoted before Emerson urges his countrymen to "sing a land unsung"--the problem, however, is that no matter how native the son, it will have a foreign air.⁸

One reason I am so attracted to Natty Bumppo's final utterance is that it seems to represent an attempt to bypass this linguistic dilemma by reducing the verbal component of foundation to a bare, almost inarticulate minimum: "here"--one lone monosyllabic word. And not even a noun at that, but a deictic, that is, a word that points, not one that names. There is another character in The Prairie, Dr. Battius, a naturalist who goes around the American wilderness designating new-world flora with comically inappropriate Latinate nouns. Notwithstanding the obvious differences, Cooper's batty naturalist and García Márquez's gypsy seer have something in common, since they both serve to point out the gap between the New World and the old words. Natty, however, is savvy enough to realize that such naming will not

work--and thus he attempts to lay down para-verbal foundations, to root himself outside of language.

A more general manifestation of this dilemma takes the form of what I would call the typical American epiphany. In Hawthorne's The Marble Faun, there comes a moment when the heroine, Miriam, realizes that her self-portrait is actually a copy of a sixteenth-century painting. She realizes, that is, that she is not an "original," that her face is not really hers, that the "here" of self-identity has been superseded by the "there" of artistic tradition. A similar epiphany occupies the last pages of One Hundred Years of Solitude, when the last Buendía, upon deciphering Melquíades' manuscript, discovers that the family's fate has already been sealed, that even the act of decipherment has been foretold in the manuscript: his nueva novela turns out to be an old story. What happens in epiphanies like these is that discovery is negated by a somber recovery of Old World traditions, of the already written or the already seen. American epiphanies are figurative and often fatal voyages of recovery. In its quest for original achievement, American literature is hexed by such scenes of déja vu and déja lu, which have their source in the distance between words and things.

Sketchily told, this is my story. I do not believe, of course, that it is the whole story, but I do think that, if we are going to tell the story of New World literature, we do need to cross disciplinary and geographical boundaries in some of the ways I have indicated here. Like my earlier presentations, my remarks of today are still another plea for hybrid or hyphenated thinking. Other than that, I can summarize the moral of my story by referring to another story, this one by Borges. At the end of El hacedor there is a man who, after much labor on a map of the world, discovers that

the map only traces the outlines of his own face. Those of you who have been patient enough to sit through my musings on Cuban, American, and Cuban-American literature, know that Borges' cartographer looks a bit like me. Which is another way of saying that my story ends exactly where it began--right here.

NOTES

1. I am thinking here in particular of two recent important works, Vera M. Kutzinsky, Against the American Grain: Myth and History in William Carlos Williams, Jay Wright, and Nicolás Guillén (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); and Bell Gale Chevigny and Gari Laguardia, eds., Reinventing the Americas: Comparative Studies of Literature of the United States and Spanish America (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). The latter is a very rich collection of essays on various aspects of inter-American comparatism and an excellent starting point for a study of New World literature in a comparative context.
2. I take the quotation from Doris Sommer's provocative study of the image of the land in Sarmiento and Cooper, "Practical Misreadings: Latin American Uses of Cooper," forthcoming.
3. See Bell Gale Chevigny, "'Insatiable Unease': Melville and Carpentier and the Search for an American Hermeneutic," in Reinventing the Americas, pp. 34-59.
4. Hanke's collective volume is devoted to a critique of Herbert Eugene Bolton's controversial essay, "The Epic of Greater America" (1932). While I have taken my title from Hanke's book, my argument does not presuppose the correctness (or for that matter the incorrectness) of Bolton's theory about the unity of hemispheric history; I do think that, whatever the status of the "Bolton theory" in contemporary American historiography, literary scholars can still learn a great deal from Bolton's ideas.
5. Home as Found, introduction by Lewis Leary (New York: Capricorn Books, 1961), pp. 162-64. See also Cynthia Steele, "The Fiction of National Formation: The Indigenista Novels of James Fenimore Cooper and Rosario Castellanos," in Reinventing the Americas, pp. 60-67.
6. James Fenimore Cooper, The Prairie (New York: New American Library, 1980), p. 401.
7. I take the terms "consciousness of being" and "consciousness of place" from Larzer Ziff, Literary Democracy: The Declaration of Cultural Independence in America (New York: Penguin, 1982), p. 76. Ziff uses these terms while paraphrasing Poe's views on dying; for Poe dying means having the consciousness of being replaced with the consciousness of locality.
8. Although I cannot do so here, I think that it can be shown that the theme of inscription-as-estrangement is less prevalent in the American Renaissance than in the Spanish-American Boom. One of the reasons is that, since the American Renaissance is part of the history of the Spanish-American Boom, the Spanish-Americans have learned from their North American counterparts to be wary of the pitfalls inherent in a too sanguine a view of the idea of durable verbal foundation.