

Latin American Studies in the Indian Classroom

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In the early eighties, when I started my university studies at politically conscious Jawaharlal Nehru University New Delhi, Fidel and Che were on all the university murals and of course in the classroom. We had visiting professors for our five-year degree program who were from La Habana and had come under teacher exchange programs with Cuba, or who had left Franco's Spain to settle in India. The latter taught Spanish Golden Age literature and history but found it difficult to entice students away from the heady lectures and rhetoric of the Cubans. Cervantes and Lope de Vega were no match for José Martí. Young Indian professors spent time in Mexico and Cuba under bilateral agreements. Our literature class bibliography consisted in the main of the Boom generation authors: García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar, and Mario Vargas Llosa, as well as the obligatory and unclassifiable Jorge Luis Borges and Juan Rulfo. As can be imagined, we read the politics of the times into their stories. We generally didn't pay much attention to literary history with its emphasis on the continuities between one generation of writers and another. Instead, the texts magically echoed to us what was happening on the Indian street. Backstabbing postrevolutionary politicians in Martín Luis Guzmán's *La sombra del caudillo* reminded us of the deadly internecine strife in our own post-Independence polity; a film like *Ahí está el detalle* worked well with its humor and subversion. But we also rued the fact that the inertia of a twisted justice system would never allow for a Cantinflas-like character ignorant enough to take it on. Latin American studies were a pretext to get our own political angst sorted out. The continent was made to mean in a particular way; it was an example of revolution and resistance to hegemony. However, we didn't investigate the particular history

from which the texts had sprung. Years later these sentences from Carlos J. Alonso's *Spanish American Regional Novel* seemed relevant to our situation:

If we succumb to the temptation of identifying a revolutionary or demystifying value in the difference supposedly entailed by Latin America, we run the risk of fetishizing that difference, of becoming enamored of the critical opportunities that it affords, thereby drawing attention away from the very concrete situation of exploitation from which it arises. What I would like to propose can be summarized in the following fashion: let us indeed explore the ways in which, for example, Borges' *écriture* or Lezama's Gnostic formulations question or subvert the Western episteme but let us not make that critique contingent on their *being Latin American*. (32)

Could we have avoided this "temptation"? What to others might have seemed an arbitrary choice of subjects confirmed our beliefs. We never delved into the local politics of postrevolutionary Mexican society because there was no Internet and library resources were scarce. But our readings of a decontextualized Michel Foucault made us confident that the epistemes we were deconstructing in these novels and films and the Western episteme the French thinker worked on were all alike. The situation was not uncommon in other literature departments outside Spain and Latin America, and the use of literary theory was often arbitrary and opportunistic and substituted for any engagement with the text on its own terms.

The real challenge arose when the time came to write a dissertation. The incoherence of sprinkling literary theory on analyses of Fuentes's texts became difficult

to sustain for a hundred pages. The penny dropped when I stopped at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, en route to Mexico City, where I was to work for nine months on a Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores bilateral fellowship. On signing the register at the Hispanic Division I was unsure as to what to put down as my area of research interest. I had read all of Carlos Fuentes's works and didn't need to consult those, and I couldn't investigate French literary theory at the Hispanic division. In January 1995 the ferment in Chiapas was still in full swing, so while looking for possible pronouncements by Fuentes on Chiapas I got into a conversation with Barbara Tenenbaum, the Mexican specialist at the library. She casually asked how my interest in Mexico had been awakened in faraway India, and I spoke blithely about the first pages of Fuentes's *La región más transparente* (*Where the Air Is Clear*) on Mexico City, which reminded me so much of New Delhi in the 1970s: the stratification of society that Fuentes had laid out at the beginning, the aristocrats, the bourgeoisie, the expatriates, the scandalous parties, the exclusivity of the *popoff* crowd. His portrayal of the minute hierarchies of class and race had rung a bell and encouraged me to read his other novels, such as *Las buenas conciencias* (*The Good Conscience*), set in small-town Guanajuato, which traced the roots of a musty, rancid feudal class that I could also recognize in my own country.

Tenenbaum listened, fascinated by my impressionistic analogies. With hindsight I shrink at my ingenuous approach to research, but the flicker of interest in Latin America was due to what I thought I saw in my own land. In my mind's eye I can still imagine a dusty hamlet in the states of Bihar or Uttar Pradesh as the ghost town of Comala, where only revenge and passion reigned. The fatalism in Rulfo's texts was

similar to our karmic logic, and his desperate protagonists were like the peasants we saw in the film *Mother India* (dir. Mehboob Khan, India, 1957). Tenenbaum wanted to talk about Octavio Paz's work. Paz of course had gone much beyond the surface of Indian reality, which he had viewed often through the lens of surrealism. At that point I couldn't grapple with all the philosophical underpinnings of his texts, but it was through such chance encounters that my research started taking shape. What might have been a stray conversation for a busy specialist at the monumental Library of Congress gave a sense of direction to an obscure PhD student. Tenenbaum mentioned her own work on nineteenth-century Mexican nationalism and advised me to retrace the roots of Fuentes's nationalism to another era because certain traits were enduring. The issue in Mexico was not about the Right and the Left, as I so fervently believed, having extrapolated my contemporary university experiences in Delhi to the Mexican political landscape, nor was it just a fight between liberals and conservatives of the nineteenth century but rather between centralism and federalism.

When I reached Mexico in 1995, Yvette Jiménez Báez of language and literature studies at El Colegio de México made me understand the Mexican field of letters and cultural production à la Bourdieu. I had to read the literature that Fuentes must have read when he was growing up in the 1940s. I began studying the work of Fernando Benítez, *Los Indios de México*, in order to understand Fuentes's version of *indigenismo*. *Zapatismo* was all in the air, and Subcomandante Marcos was a hero among the student population in 1995. It was difficult not to get carried away again with local university politics at the UNAM and understand *indigenismo* through the prism of minoritarianism and oppression of

the student movements. But since every thinker of repute in Mexico had defined his or her nationalism in relation to the indigenous population, I began to retrace this chimerical phenomenon in the writings of nineteenth-century thinkers. I started visiting the newspaper archive at the Hemeroteca to find Fuentes's earliest newspaper article published in 1949, in which Aztec gods rubbed shoulders with the international set and the *hoi polloi*. And then I recognized the pseudo-indigenous characters in his other works. The Indianization of the *criollo* was the flavor of the moment, as the creolization of the Indian had been in the in the pre-Independence period, as a newspaper columnist had so presciently put it. I traced Fuentes's friendship and rifts with Octavio Paz, the founding of the rival publications *Nexos* and *Vuelta*, and above all Enrique Krauze and his acerbic criticism of Fuentes's version of nationalism. I was slowly learning that these rivalries had less to do with ideological schisms and more with shifts in the field of cultural production. Krauze's biographical sketch of Benito Juárez in *Siglo de caudillos* became especially illuminating on this point. It was politics and not essence that had made a fanatical Catholic into a liberal who laid down the Reform Laws to control the power of the Church. The shifts in his political position were not due to any essential change. Conservatives could be atheists, just as liberals could be fervent Catholics. After my Mexican discoveries I began to look at the history and polity of my own country with fresh eyes, free from the prejudices I had grown up with.

Today I still look for Indian analogies to bring Mexican history closer to India. Students respond animatedly when the comparison is made between the foreign Hapsburg prince Maximilian, who was invited to rule Mexico by the conservatives,

and Sonya Gandhi, the head of the erstwhile ruling party the Indian National Congress, whose Italian origins are always a talking point in any political discussion. Both rulers felt the need to ingratiate themselves with the lowliest; Maximilian's favorite constituency was the indigenous people, and Gandhi's party was said to be tilting toward the Left against a rising India's developmental aspirations.

With hindsight it would have been safer but much more sterile if I had stuck to the set of formulations that Latin America was known for: the mestizo continent, civilization and barbarism. And from our side I could have added revolution, resistance, dictatorships, feminism. But Latin American reality, literature, and history fell between these fixed rubrics. The contingencies of history, the multivoiced novels, and the myriad contradictions in reality made the above categories look archaic. The time for "felicitous formulation" was over and the "significant season" was here, to borrow expressions from Carlos Alonso. It could be argued that I was still identifying in another culture aspects of my own, but at least the comparisons were changing and in flux.

The scholar of other cultures has never had it easy. I hear strident criticism in my own country about Octavio Paz's *In Light of India* from leftist intellectuals who decry his "Eurocentric" approach to Indian reality as well as his anti-Left stances during the second half of his life; equally strident criticism comes from those on the Right who object to his stray comments on nationalism and the caste system. *In Light of India*, according to Paz, was "a more or less ordered gathering of the reflections, impressions, and objections that India provoked in me." His earlier works like *The Monkey Grammarian* or *Conjunctions*

On Becoming a Latin American Literary Critic

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and Disjunctions had never even been noticed in circles that were not intellectual. Paz's primary concern was Mexican identity, and he looked to India in order to temper his ideas about his own country. His words sum up what it means to teach Latin America half a world away: "The fact of being Mexican helped me to see the difference of being Indian—from the difference of being Mexican. . . . To a certain extent, I can understand what it means to be Indian because I am Mexican" (81).

References

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How does one become an academic Latin American literary critic? For that matter, how does a literary-intellectual field develop and function? The conventional pathway to literary criticism, which was partly mine, would be through an undergraduate degree in languages with the attendant classes of literature, followed by a period of postgraduate studies, first publications, and then a search for the first job. But perhaps we should first begin our answer by unpacking the terms "Latin America" and "literary criticism." What do they mean? What do they stand for? If once they could be taken for granted, this no longer seems the case in the wake of the deconstruction of area studies and that floating signifier "Latin America." And the purported goals and validity of literary criticism as a profession or a discipline, signally unloved by most creative writers themselves, have never gone unquestioned. Often seen as a luxurious adornment in the humanities, and in more recent times overrun by the high tide of cultural studies and increasingly relegated to the backwaters of language departments, "lit crit" struggles to maintain academic market share. At least that is the case from where I write in Australia.

And what about literary theory? While literary critics have not always been literary theorists, and though many are allergic to theory for fear of (or out of distaste for) its high-flown theoretical abstractions, it's hard to imagine anyone carrying out academic literary criticism these days without a minimum of theory. Criticism is thus positioned between literature and philosophy: like literature it is an inventive, quasi-literary (rhetorical) practice, but like philosophy it is a discourse that seeks to downplay (or conceal) its inevitable "rhetoricity." In this view, the distance between author and reader/critic is progressively reduced—not toward some

shared agreement on authorial intention (though that is one possibility), but rather toward literature and criticism's mutual imbrication as rhetorically constructed discourses working on the same materials. As a reading of culture and history (against the grain or otherwise), literary creation is also a critical practice; and out of an experience of critical dialogue with a literary text, literary criticism produces a creative reassemblage of its elements within an explicative narrative, which, though it have analytical and objectivist intentions, is nonetheless a creative, rhetorical replotment of a literary text's being. In the right hands literary criticism is a high, writerly art.

But there's also that other way that you arrive at literary criticism, that undocumented path, the chance apparition of a moment of literary joy, or contestation, which henceforth seems to unconsciously drive some people toward the practice of literary criticism. Either you get the bug or you don't. At least that is how it began for me. I began studying Spanish and informally studying literature when, on a lark, I went to live in Helsinki in the early 1970s. Franco was about to die and I wanted to go to Spain and experience the cultural explosion which would surely come (and did). To that end I took up studying Spanish at night school while I worked in menial jobs during the day clearing restaurant tables, shoveling snow. My teacher was a Chilean exile pursued by the DINA. Máximo was not much of a Spanish teacher (by day he was a hydrologist for the government measuring water levels in Finnish lakes), but he was a great human being. He had been studying engineering in Russia when the Pinochet coup occurred. Considered a subversive, he could not return home. Disenchanted with what he regarded as somber daily life in Russia, he moved with his Russian wife to