

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).

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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, wrierly 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

Finland. To supplement his income he earned extra money at night giving Spanish classes. With his lack of pedagogical method, I soon exhausted what he had to offer in terms of basic Spanish instruction, so he gave me some different texts, including poems by Pablo Neruda. With my rudimentary Spanish and a bilingual dictionary, I began to translate a few. I was less interested in the epic and political stuff than the sensual poems and the love poems. I just didn't have the education to absorb the symbolic density of the "big" poems. The other texts were a set of *informes* in Spanish that had just begun to filter out to the United Nations about the atrocities being committed in Pinochet's jails. I began to translate these as well. It was my first close encounter with the impact of the Pinochet dictatorship on real lives, since I had left Australia in 1971 before the massive influx of exiles, refugees, and economic migrants fleeing the Southern Cone dictatorships. With a mixture of morbid fascination and sheer horror, I read of the lurid torture of jailed Chilean leftists, practices so vile you would not talk about them without first sizing up your listener's sensibilities. Needless to say, I got *una buena dosis de política* with my literary studies from which, fortunately, I have never recovered.

Another key moment was my good fortune in being accepted into university as an older student who had failed high school. I wanted to major in Spanish so I could get at that amazing literature. But Latin America was "way over there," at a distance of 10,000 kilometers. I therefore took the decision to study for an MA in Hispanic literature and linguistics at the Instituto Caro y Cuervo in Bogotá in 1988–1989. As an undergraduate student I had read poetry, novels, and short stories but had never studied them with the level of sophistication of the literary theories

provided by the Caro y Cuervo. Nor had I studied literature alongside the history of the Spanish language—phonetics and phonology, dialectology and discourse analysis. But my studies occurred against a background of political turmoil, a country under siege by drug cartels and paramilitary and guerrilla groups. What we were studying, no matter what the period, could not be neatly separated from the contested ground we inhabited. And those struggles often reached into the barrios where we lived. Anyone who lived in Colombia for an extended period through the 1980s and 1990s and experienced the atmosphere of fear and violence has left a part of themselves back there. Many failed to survive it: presidential candidates, unionists, police, journalists, kids conscripted into one side of the conflict or another, not to mention all the people ostensibly outside the armed conflict, including those impacted by urban neighborhood violence.

It's therefore impossible to neatly separate literature from politics. But how we conceptualize their relationship is crucial, lest we mouth clichés about politics or sociologize literature out of business. Though the literary-critical wars between different schools of criticism have largely subsided, there is still an unspoken division between those who pursue ideology critique so as to celebrate or indict texts according to whether or not they display a progressive ideology, and those who, while not denying the political and historical entanglements of literary texts, nevertheless wish to also explain how a work of art functions *as art*. Another way of saying this is to declare that a literary text is not exhausted by social critique. In fact its true political import might be in the way it opens up a space of thinking not bracketed by fidelity to some known historical record or doctrinaire set of political values, a space

in which invention provides alternative "distributions of the sensible," to quote Jacques Rancière, different configurations of what can be thought, heard, said, and done. The literary artist has the ability to create counterworlds in which the system of normative divisions that define the relationships between people and things is placed under erasure, so to speak. And this is done, moreover, by an imaginative-aesthetic reordering of the relationship between the sensual and the rational, the "transformation of the sensory fabric of 'being together,'" as Rancière would have it.

As an undergraduate student, my first formal engagement was with Cervantes ("ese man spikea full bacano"), then Lorca, Borges, Mistral, Arguedas, Vallejo, Cortázar, Rulfo, Onetti, Lispector, to the Boom and beyond, to Piglia and Puig, Eltit and then backwards in time to *modernismo*, to Martí and Silva, to Nájera and Nervo, and to an enduring fascination with Rubén Darío. Much later I would discover the poetry of Roberto Juarroz and Antonio Porchia. But another chance occurrence had me going to a literature conference in Guatemala in 2000 and subsequently gravitating toward contemporary, post-civil war Central American literature. As a legacy of mainly working through the canon as an undergraduate and postgraduate, I had really only read Darío and Asturias, who stand over the Central American literary landscape like two volcanoes, but not much contemporary fare, save for *testimonios* and some revolutionary poetry. I soon discovered the startling political realism of Franz Galich and Horacio Castellanos Moya, the tender fictions of Rodrigo Rey Rosa and Eduardo Halfon, the raw intimacy of Jacinta Escudos, and much more. I also made some lasting intellectual friendships. I make the pilgrimage to

Central America twice a year, 40,000 kilometers in total in two trips. Curiously enough, the tyranny of distance makes it somehow all the more rewarding.

My obsession with Rubén Darío led me to research his passage through Buenos Aires in 1893–1898, a foundational moment in Latin American literature and literary criticism, when a concentrated knot of young literary writers and intellectuals shared the cultural space of a nascent Latin American cultural modernity. It was also the period of historic transition of the writer from patronage to professionalism and thus the need to redefine his or her status and function. By day the young literary writers worked in some form of commercial scribal culture, usually journalism, where they were asked to contribute not only poems and *crónicas* but obituaries, theater reviews, travelogues, and a variety of “*curiosidades*.” By night they wrote their verses and frequented the same bars, restaurants, and literary societies. But whether by day or night, everything was an opportunity to write well. It was a period when print technology was undergoing a revolution, when literary reviews were born and died after just a handful of issues, when the hegemony of *porteño* patrician cultural tradition was buckling under the weight of mass underclass migration into Buenos Aires from the countryside and from Italy. It was also buckling under the impress more generally of French culture in the Hispanic world carried by the young literary *advenedizos* under its sway. As a consequence, along with the fervor of the new liberal capitalism came the birth of a new division of labor, including intellectual labor, which produced the professionalization and semi-autonomization of the literary-intellectual field. It was mostly a masculine affair, but as the twentieth century progressed, women and subaltern and minority

groupings discovered that it was also a space to be appropriated and occupied.

The heyday of *modernismo* is also the founding gesture of modern Latin American literary criticism, which not only ran parallel with the conquest of the authority and prestige of the literary writer but was intimately linked to its development. The struggles that ensued in the new field of cultural power, then, should not be seen as distractions from the main game (writing literature) but as constituent elements necessary for the institution of the field. One of those struggles was over a supposed clash between artistic and political values, which has regularly come to the fore in Latin American literature and criticism, especially during times of dictatorship and revolution and the Cold War. Is art’s primary function ethico-political or artistic? Who shall decide and with what warrant? Through the turn of the twentieth century, *modernismo* was often dismissed as a dilettante exercise, a turning away from the demands of nation building, squandering its currency on princesses and peacocks, chandeliers and *chinoiserie*, its erotics and delicacy (“paint not the thing, but the effect it produces”—Mallarmé) considered a discredited example of art for art’s sake and the stuff of effeminate Francophiles. Part of this attitude stemmed from the general antagonism felt by Spain and its remaining intransigent cultural loyalists in Latin America (with their protracted *casticismo*) toward France in the nineteenth century. But it was also related to the lingering conception of literature as primarily a statist practice.

I proposed with Werner Mackenbach a volume of essays taking a new approach to this literary field and positioning Darío as a “rooted cosmopolitan.” It was in this period that I began to read the criticism of

the wonderfully talented Susana Zanetti and invited her to contribute to the Darío volume. I had come late to her work. Zanetti didn’t seem to have the same international projection as other Latin American female critics, and we are the poorer for it. She agreed to write a chapter for the book. The fieldwork for my essay led me in 2007 to the library of the Departamento de Filosofía y Letras of the Universidad de Buenos Aires in Caballito. In search of the *memorias* of the Argentine *letrados* I found it fascinating to read of the *letrados* who bumped elbows and *copas* with Darío and how they each shaped their memoirs according to how they viewed their place within the cultural struggles of the time. My days in Caballito were spent scouring the archives and nights were spent listening to the harangues of my Argentine engineer landlord, who had lost his job under Menem and was renting out rooms in his house to make ends meet. Literature and politics, politics and literature.

The visit to Buenos Aires was also the chance to pursue another interest: Latin American intellectuals. I had recently read Óscar Terán’s *De utopías, catástrofes y esperanzas: Un camino intelectual* and was keen to meet him. Terán was a historian of Argentine thought and a scholar of late nineteenth-century aesthetics in Argentina. I found his e-mail address, made contact, and received a warm message inviting me to give him a call when I got to Buenos Aires. He agreed to meet me one bitterly cold day in a small café in Caballito. I felt bad because he had the flu, yet he insisted on the meeting. I asked him about how the Left was going with its self-analysis in the wake of the revolutionary period, about his years of exile, about mistakes made (and owned up to or not), about lessons learned. It’s not about abandoning the primordial gesture of the Left. Who would want to do that? It’s about critiquing theory and

practice—theories that lead to cul-de-sacs; practices that compromise ethics. That’s what Óscar went on about. Of course I had already read *De utopías*, so there were no new revelations, but just sitting with him, someone who had a reputation for warmth and generosity, someone who had invested so much heart and soul in trying to change Argentina, was reward enough. Out of the blue he revealed a secret devotion to Darío and his plans for a monograph on the Nicaraguan. I told him I was also putting together a book of essays on Darío and that it would be an honor if he would contribute an essay. We agreed to keep in touch. Several months after returning to Sydney and with the Darío book steaming full ahead, I e-mailed Óscar with a few questions and to see if he was still interested in the project. No reply. I waited and then sent another e-mail. Still no reply. By May 2008, unable to live with the mystery, I reached back through our e-mail conversations for his phone number and rang him. His wife answered: “Didn’t you hear? Óscar died of cancer in March.” I felt terrible, embarrassed, awkward, sad. He was probably sick all along, even when I had visited. I had a lump in my throat as big as a football.

The Darío volume was eventually published in 2010, complete with an essay by Susana Zanetti on one of Darío’s later poems from 1906 (“Epístola a la señora de Leopoldo Lugones”), a tour de force of critical insight and elegant expression. Of Darío, she wrote: “Si se refugia en la intimidad de la carta para contar un viaje que no se roza ya con la ilusión de la aventura del cosmopolitismo, lo hace para asumirlo como destino, un conflictivo lugar, un territorio que entrega como se entrega al olvido.” What does it all mean, then, to become a Latin American literary critic? I simply don’t know. But I do know that to do justice to the dazzling richness of Latin

American literature and the legacy of its critics, you need to write (and live) with critical passion, to quote the title of one of Jean Franco’s books. And you need to look for that other pathway into the profession, which has no signposts.

In 2013, Susana Zanetti also passed away. Let us never allow any of these writers, critics, and intellectuals to disappear into oblivion. ■