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Growing Pains: Those of Hispanism and My Own

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In this exercise, I am following the Unamunian model of “a lo que salga,” an expository method that pretends to be purely spontaneous but is not. I have thought about what I want to say, but I prefer not to try to organize it into neat compartments, but rather to follow a kind of mental—and personal—order, a *dispositio* that does not propose to be impeccably structured.

During a good part of the Franco era, Spain maintained a type of isolationist policy. The country seemed distant, not only politically but culturally. When I first went to Spain, as a college junior in the fall 1968 (a year of some paradigm shake-ups, if not shifts), I was struck by the intensely and forcibly national character of the bookstores and theaters. People spoke of going to France to buy books and to view movies. There were many U.S. films being shown, but they were censored and sometimes rendered incomprehensible. (*Mogambo* seems to be the archetypal example.) Despite the alienating legacy of the Civil War and the association of Franco with Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy, Spain had grown, little by little, into a popular tourist site, and Madrid was a wonderful place for students. The Spanish friends that I made—some of whom have remained my friends for over three decades—struck me as sophisticated, articulate, and hungry for knowledge. Despite the

difficulty in hearing all sides of the news, they certainly seemed to know more about what was going on in the world than I did. Nonetheless, there was a military feel about the city, and an obvious military presence. Ironically, one of the reasons why American students were eager to study in Spain was that our teachers at home included Spaniards exiled after the Civil War, or those who had been taught and encouraged in their study of Spanish literature and history by exiles. This was before the surge in the U.S. Hispanic population, before it became practical as well as illuminating to learn Spanish.

I picked Spanish as a major because I liked the idea of combining the study of literature with the study of another language and culture (or cultures). It was a lucky choice, because one obviously did not know at the time that Spanish would be *the* language of choice in high schools and colleges, or that the U.S. would acquire a large Hispanic population. During the period in which I studied at the University of Virginia and Johns Hopkins University, the emphasis in the academic realm was on Spain. My only required courses as an undergraduate were in Spanish literature, although Virginia had a broad selection of courses in Spanish American literature. Hopkins's Spanish faculty consisted of four superb teachers and scholars, three in peninsular and one in Spanish American specializations. Because Hopkins relished its role as a leader in theory, students in Spanish minored in theory and criticism, and we learned to respect tradition but to pay careful attention to the latest theoretical schools, movements, and approaches to literary study. Nonetheless, Hispanists of my generation will recall, in Paul De Man's term, "the resistance to theory" among many of our colleagues.

The adversaries of theory believed that literary study and theory could be mutually exclusive, and they feared that zealous supporters of theory were neglecting literature. "What's the point of a so-called Comedia person reading all of Derrida and two or three plays by Calderón?" was the type of comment that one heard. The strategy of converting a *both/and* prospect into an *either/or* matter allowed disgruntled Hispanists to oppose the inevitable, but only temporarily. As it turned out, theory did for literary study what democracy did for Spain: it opened doors that had been shut off to exchange and dialogue. And it proved to be, perhaps a bit paradoxically, that Hispanists were hungering for concepts and models that would serve their investigations. This should not have been a surprise. One can use the example of the huge impact of Lionel Abel's *Metatheatre* on Comedia studies to show that the right stimulus can produce significant and wide-ranging responses. Analogously, the later development of the New Historicism and Cultural

Materialism—with their focus on Renaissance texts in England—offers models for the study of early modern Spanish drama, among other texts.

I think that there is an obvious correspondence between the rise of theory and the rise of Latin American literature in the U.S. university system. It has always been difficult to separate the literature of Central and South America from politics and ideology. Major writers were politicians and activists, and the conflicts in governments and in society made their way into texts, as nations sought identities and stability, both of which were elusive. Even *modernismo* and the cry for art for art's sake emanated from a backdrop that made the isolation of art from reality seem quaint and, at times, frivolous, until one recognized that *modernismo* (and, analogously, *culteranismo*) had its own ideology, its own agenda. In the case of peninsular Spanish literature, the belated influence of North American New Criticism determined a formalist direction to many studies, but context was never out of the picture. The study of the nineteenth-century novel, for example, was informed by social change, and a writer such as Benito Pérez Galdós—all of whose works capture a certain historical sensibility—wrote a series of novels that attempted to combine fiction and history.

When I began studying Spanish literature, Miguel de Unamuno and the Generation of 1898 were among the most popular topics for courses and dissertations. Historians and philosophers were attempting to capture—and to explain—the essence of Spain, and textual study reflected this interest. Another key figure was Federico García Lorca, whose mythical status had something to do with his recourse to the world of the gypsies and the world of the mind, and whose poetry and drama was studied with only vague allusions to his personal life. During the Franco period, we were aware that multiple versions of history had been and were being written, that is, that there were facts that would be known at a later date, and from a distance. There was a historical “Other” that would be revealed, and that would reshape both history and literary history.

Spain was part of the Old World, Latin America part of the New, and this distinction was significant. Spain was trying to face the present by, in one form or another, recuperating the past, while Latin America had a far different history and only recent ties to the Iberian Peninsula. As I started my professional career in 1974, I had as an intertext, as it were, the memory of having lived, if indirectly, in Franco's Spain, a Spain that would after 1975 be transformed in the move toward democracy and that would test the waters of liberalism in art as well as in life. Spanish culture was modified by accessibility to controversial books, films, and other media, and to an acceptance of political debate.



This affected not only artistic production but also, of course, approaches to the past. The openness and opportunities to reconsider history, including literary history, coincided with the increased attention to theory in Europe, Latin America, and the United States. Spain was redefining itself, and as former margins became centers, and vice versa, texts and traditions could be reexamined, the canon could be modified and expanded, and previously blocked areas of creation and investigation could be pursued. The growth of narrative, film, and poetry was to be expected, and it has been exciting to observe a boom in publishing and, among other phenomena, a large list of top-tier women writers. As a long-time admirer of playwrights such as Antonio Buero Vallejo and Alfonso Sastre—both of whom had to write and often to present their works under adverse conditions—I had hoped to see captivatingly new directions in theater and brilliant dramatists to carry on the task. The former can be recognized more easily than the latter, which may have more to do with the customs of theater-going than with the talent of playwrights. A new market had—and has—to be created.

Over the years, changes in the politics (and the rhetoric) of literary study has matched changes in the politics of world diplomacy and in the fate of individual countries. Not only has Latin American literature become more prominent, but new, or newly centered, areas of research have taken hold, including colonial, indigenous, and U.S. Hispanic literature and culture, and, correspondingly, countries such as Mexico have moved from the margins. Even as a specialist in early modern Spanish literature, now outnumbered by Latin Americanists, I have enjoyed observing the altered states of the art, along with the impact of theory, not to mention technology, on all areas of research and teaching. Simply put, research and the curriculum are not what they used to be, because borders have shifted, and what may be termed the crossing of borders is common. Course design reflects new conceptions regarding the establishment—or, in many cases, the elimination—of parameters. It is fascinating to look at the titles of dissertations and dissertations-in-progress in the lists published each year in the journal *Hispania* to note how radically current topics, inflected by theory and varieties of interdisciplinarity, differ from those of preceding decades. The same is true with regard to course titles and descriptions, as can be ascertained from searches of graduate program websites and catalogs, which might be associated, respectively, with the Italian Renaissance categories of the “modern” and the “ancient.” I believe that Hans Robert Jauss had it right when he suggested that that textual analysis and literary study in general, may be framed as the dialectical interaction of a stable text and constantly modified contexts and interpreters, essentially the “horizon of



expectations” against the “horizon of experience.” This is what keeps us on our toes, and what keeps the academy going, in a never-ending dialogue among scholars, disciplines, points of view, and the past and the present. And that is why I am more energized each year by the prospect of teaching (and continuing to learn) at both the graduate and undergraduate levels.

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