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Hispanism(s) Briefly: A Reflection on the State of the Discipline

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Barely a few months after the 400th anniversary of the publication of *Don Quijote I* (1605), the burning question for many is this: what kind of future do the classics have once there is no authorial presence to speak of, and even the text itself stands on shaky and murky grounds? The fading author and text—some complain—are now replaced, usurped as it were, by the towering theoretician who feels free to engage in free-wheeling commentary disconnected from, and unhampered by, the specific historical coordinates (determinant as they might be) of author and text. The suggestion is that in the absence of author and text the postmodern critic emerges as a sort of all-mighty demiurge, the true and only possible creator of the work of art. Pierre Menard, author of the *Quijote*. Foucault, author of the *Quijote*.

To take it one step further, a related question can be raised concerning the loyalties of literary studies as a discipline of knowledge. As the century-old loyalties to national languages and universal imperatives (ethical as well as aesthetic) fade away into the permanent sunset of post-modernity, critics seem to be scrambling to find some kind of new ethical and/or political grounding, from multiculturalism to eco-feminism to human rights. In this environment (so the argument goes) the "innocent" classics are used and abused in favor of, and against, political ends specific to our own time and place. Again, the critic would

be erasing the text and substituting it with the content of his or her own political agendas and professional aspirations. Moreover, there seems to be a new cloud of suspicion hanging over this type of "literary politicking," which is perceived in some quarters as an empty performance with no stakes or impact in the "real world," i.e., an academic practice that may have more to do with professional positioning (*medro*) than with genuine political or ethical concerns. In this -so the charge goes- we abuse not just the text, but the endless list of "others" for whom we claim to speak.

An interesting notion one hears now and then is that in a professional environment dominated by the Pierre Menardian truism (purportedly, postmodern academia) we run the risk of being trapped in endless discursive circularity. With respect to this notion, if the issue is whether we can have direct, unabridged access to the original truth of the text, the answer is of course a resounding NO, in so far as the observer (postmodern or not) is unavoidably present in the product of observation –as José Antonio Maravall pointed out as early as his 1959 *Teoría del saber histórico*. But we should not forget that this is a two-way street; that "Pierre Menard" is as much a Cervantine reading of post-modernity as it is a postmodern reading of *Don Quixote*. It is well known that, from the very prologue of the Cervantine novel, the text calls attention to the fact that any speech act is for all practical purposes an act of negotiation with authority.

On these grounds, one could conceivably reflect on why is it that Pat Robertson can call for the assassination of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez on national TV and the statement goes uncensored, while Kanye West's remarks about the president during the NBC show for the relief of the victims of Katrina (reportedly "George Bush doesn't care about black people") are erased from the west coast airing. To be sure, it wouldn't be a case of "what would Cervantes say if he were Pierre Menard?," but a case of how reading the *Quijote* trains us to better understand this particular *why*, since the Cervantine text asks similar *whys* about the nature of authority and the media.

Walter Benjamin hit the nail right on the head with his thesis against "historicism," when he suggested that a historical reading must convey a sense of urgency and immediacy to the extent that the past is alive in our dreams and aspirations, as well as in our nightmares. Would an essay that deals with the Cervantine take on the *morisco* question not be all the more complete, all the more Cervantine, and all the more historical when it incorporates a reflection on what it means for José María Aznar to state at Georgetown University, in the aftermath of New York 9/11 and Madrid 3/11, that Spain has been fighting Islamic

terrorists since the beginning of the Reconquest? Wouldn't it be more historical, more true to the immediacy and urgency of the classics, to make the Cervantine point about Marcela all over again by way of the Kanye West situation? After all, Marcela and West have a similar problem vis à vis the media, in that they cannot be heard as long as they continue to "rant" off script. Isn't the Cervantine mistrust of the authorities and institutions of his time best justified by the authorities and institutions of our time? Isn't the Cervantine ironization of prejudice in his time best applied to, or rather against, the prejudices of ours?

On the other hand, some might see these notions as typical of the type of postmodern commentary that delights in dragging innocent classics into the fray of our own culture wars, blindly dismissing the historical determinants of author and text. At this point it might be useful to illustrate here -in an admittedly oversimplified way- the nightmare scenario that is sometimes associated with postmodern (theoretical) approaches to literary studies: 1) Lacan says X and Y. 2) The Lacanian critic forces certain carefully selected passages of the classic (say *Don Quijote*) into agreeing with Lacan, thus showing that Lacan was right all along about X and Y. In this nightmare scenario the ultimate goal of literary commentary would be to prove our theoretical premises. In other words we would be working with aprioristic arguments of authority.

Continuing with the nightmare scenario, different readings or interpretations or commentary of (or on) a text would compete on the basis of rival theories with little or nothing to do with how much they might contribute to ascertaining the meaning of the text, however we understand this notion. Of course, for some, (and this is part of the problem,) the critic must posit or assume an original meaning that *needs* to be preserved, ascertained, protected from the anachronistic charges of the postmodern critic. But according to our schematization of the nightmare scenario, the issue would not be (could not be) whether this or that statement is somehow more true to the text or to Cervantes, since for this kind of criticism, Cervantes' qua authorial intention is irrelevant. The nightmare scenario then forces us to ask: How do we determine that a particular reading is better, more capable, than another? Two potential answers from inside the nightmare scenario: 1) Whoever or whichever is more successful in stating the premises (the particulars of Lacan's theory) and in squeezing the text until it bleeds some Lacan. 2) That which better protects the truth of Lacan against the attacks of Foucauldians or historicists or deconstructionists or cultural materialists. The unavoidable conclusion that would emerge from within the nightmare scenario is that this kind of disembodied, ahistorical and/or anachronistic cultural

commentary is about nothing more than me and Lacan or Lacan and me (read my desire!, as Joan Copjec puts it).

Now, here's the other nightmare scenario that some associate with traditional literary studies: 1) There's an original meaning in the text which largely coincides with the intentions of its author (barring the necessary social-historical determinants). 2) The more the critic knows about the author's biography and the historical context in which s/he lived, the closer the critic gets to this original meaning. The exclusive goal here for the critic; the critic's job as defined within this scenario, is to "read the mind of Cervantes," to continue with the example of *Don Quijote*. Instances of this second nightmare scenario are brought to us (live) from some of the institutional centers where *Don Quijote* is being currently celebrated. As Goytiloso has recently observed, the question of whether Cervantes was a *converso* or not is still at the center of much of the debate in the year of the 400th anniversary. The assumption being that getting to the truth of Cervantes' blood status (to put it in the terms of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) would be crucial to disentangling the meaning of his texts, to finally getting to the original, unquestionable, and intentional truth of *Don Quixote*.

And this brings us to the key issue of the purpose of literary studies. To set up a kind of dual-straw-man-opposition, some would argue that the purpose of a literary reading or study would be to enlighten us as to the original meaning of the text. For others, the objective would be to enlighten us as to something outside the text, say its political context, or even our own. But this opposition itself seems to rest on a fallacy: that there is a strict distinction to be made between the meaning of a text and what is outside it. To steal a line from Derrida and twist it around a bit: *il n'y a QUE hors texte*: there is nothing BUT the outside of the text. The text, in other words, was never an innocent classic; rather, it was always engaged with its multiple contexts, political, theological, philosophical.... And this is why if we, readers of literature, look for meaning exclusively in this original, pristine text, then we are like the proverbial lover looking for love in all the wrong places, or worse yet, we're looking for meaning in the only place we'll never find it.

It seems ironic that the old postmodern horse has been withstanding our blows unabated for something going on during a half a century, since before there was something to call postmodernism, in fact. What is often beaten is not theory per se, but the urge to do anything other with a text than unearth its original, authorial meaning. Significantly, this very urge to do something other has itself been manifested for the last half century as a critique of interpretation in various forms: from new historicism to deconstruction to feminism et al.

Everyone has been "against interpretation," and there is nothing new to this, because interpretation itself has never been about interpretation in that traditional sense, except in the rarest and most useless of cases. It is interesting that one of the only fields that still has a significant number of voices calling for interpretation in the old sense is Hispanism. In other words (and in the spirit of the best in witch hunting), it is in the place with the fewest postmodern enemies of interpretation that one can find the most vociferous reaction against them.

Now, if we were to extend this discussion to all areas of our field, assuming the field is Hispanism, Latin American colleagues might say, with some justification, that their side of the field suffers less from the kind of resistances we have been describing, in that history, thought, and politics have been in some ways more evidently and intrinsically a part of their endeavors throughout the history of the discipline. Who hasn't heard a colleague or two in Latin American studies on occasion disparage Peninsular sections as being lofty and out of touch with the pressing realities of our world, even irrelevant? This is unfortunate, given the wealth of both literature and its many contexts Spain has offered from its earlier history to the present.

A final clarification: although we are advocating in this brief entry an approach or approaches that orient the reader to the outside of the text, we would also caution against a certain tendency toward an untheorized engagement with texts and contexts that has started to go under the moniker of cultural studies. We are not referring to cultural studies in either its most general sense (which would be anything done in most humanities or social sciences departments) nor its most specific sense (the British school of cultural studies), but rather in the sense in which it is used today when one asks some scholars about their methodology and they answer, "well, cultural studies I guess." The problem with this usage is that here cultural studies is being used as an umbrella under which one can get away without saying anything of interest at all. Rather, in other words, than engaging with an argument, posing a political problem, or dealing with a philosophical dilemma through the reading of literature, when one does cultural studies of this sort one describes or catalogues some tendency, work, movement, practice, etc., but without taking the step to then connect that description to a general thesis. One describes, but one's descriptions stake no claim, make no argument. The value of unapologetically theoretical work is that the engagement with the so-called theoretical text tends to force the scholar to think through a question and pose and support an answer. This is not universally true, obviously; the "application paradigm" of spicing up a text with a bit of theory is in every way as bad, if not worse, than



aimless historicizing or cultural studying. In the end, to bastardize Kant, we could say that theory without history is indeed blind, but historization without theory is mindless.

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