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Cultural Buddies: Text and Context, in Context

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Literary study is, as it should be, a changing phenomenon. Current classes in literature, varied though they may be, are likely to be markedly different from their counterparts of decades earlier. The world in which our students live is fast-moving, energized, technologically complicated, and geared toward multiple interests and short attention spans. Sitting down to read a book is hardly passé, although the book may be projected on a computer screen or on a Kindle, but making a trip to a library to use journals for research seems to be moving toward anachronism. Scholars—even those who may not be on the cutting edge of today's gadgetry and the youthful mindset—will note the impact of interdisciplinary approaches, the boom in theory, and globalization. They will recognize, also, the need to update their pedagogical strategies. When I teach graduate seminars on theory, I focus on how a given theoretical model views the object under scrutiny, which can be positioned along what might be termed the spectrum of aesthetics and ideology. The scope of the enterprise can fluctuate from purely formal and "literary" readings to views of the text as a function of another system, within an unlimited array of possibilities. Intellectually speaking, the flexibility of criticism and theory is both daunting and exciting. The result is not that "anything goes," but rather that academic rigor and creativity blend in intriguing ways. In this essay, I would like to look at criteria for literary study and at the dialectics of text and context. My primary examples will be the selections in a short story anthology that I prepared a few years ago. I will look at my rationale and goals in a broad sense, and the process will include a consideration of the interplay of theory, pedagogy, and paradigm shifts as they relate to the place of literature in the classroom and in society at large.

In my opinion, the dominant factor or common denominator of literary studies over the last thirty years has been, in a word, poststructuralism, which presupposes an underlying rhetoric (and thus a link to classical

antiquity) within all discourse. Poststructuralism makes those approaches that depend on definitive readings seem a bit ingenuous; it removes from the parameters of criticism such notions as correct or transparent meanings. Because of its deconstructive bent, poststructuralism has been disparaged—unfairly, I believe—as random, irresponsible, and nihilistic, yet it has informed a critical practice that has become increasingly self-conscious and increasingly accountable for its methodology, its biases, and its inevitable shortcomings. On the one hand, theory hardly could take itself more seriously, while, on the other, the burden of the critic has become lighter, less comprehensive, less associated with absolute truth. I think that this is good, in that criticism and students (through their instructors) have profited from the lessons that recent theory in general has taught us, the first by broadening its bases and its level of tolerance, and the second by granting greater freedom of choice in the range of topics and options for research. One may consider style, technique, language, artistic flourishes, and the recourses of representation, along with other formal elements of composition, and mix and match them with social norms (or abnormalities), psychology, history, politics, economics, and so forth. Just as what was formerly designated as literary theory is now the unqualified *theory*, the field of literary studies more justifiably may have to seek an all-inclusive label, or regroup itself into categories such as cultural studies. Not only do dissertations reflect the transformation, but college and university curricula—course titles and programs of study—diverge from the content, the patterns, and the sensibility of the past. Time has wrought changes, and we must respect and adhere to—and perhaps even delight in—the fact that there is, as it were, a new world order.

I have referenced classical rhetoric as a somewhat paradoxical starting point for contemporary innovations in theory, criticism, and pedagogy. Although there have been modifications of historical approaches to literature—the New Historicism and cultural materialism, for example—the idea of a progression, in some form or another, seems appropriate and advisable for framing, analyzing, and comparing texts. Literary history has been intimately linked to the canon, which has undergone meaningful revision. What we and our students read, as well as the makeup of our colleagues and students, is by no means a mirror image of fifty years ago. It is natural, then, that how we teach will bring to light the adaptations *of* and *to* the present. It is common now for students to have defined voices in the classroom. Instructors who depend exclusively on a lecture format are in the minority; there is, in short, more practice and less preaching. Courses more frequently have stated objectives, and instructors may try harder, arguably prompted by end-of-semester student evaluations. The teacher, with careful thought and preparation, can facilitate discussion and response in an effective fashion. I have used the phrase "directed spontaneity" to describe the interaction in which the instructor lays the groundwork for the student to

experience, as if it were spontaneous, a connection with the text (see Friedman, "Quixotic"). For example, in the introduction to a course on *Don Quijote*, I might show students several metapoems—poems about poetry, such as Lope de Vega's "Soneto de repente" (Suddenly, a Sonnet)—and other types of meta-art so that they will recognize, on their own, that the prologue to Part 1 is a metaprologue. In a similar vein, I allude to the most prominent types of narrative and to cases of intertextuality without mentioning Cervantes's reworking of chivalric, pastoral, and picaresque conventions, and thus allow the students to discover the intertexts of *Don Quijote*. The figure of the professor as a distanced expert has been replaced by a collaborative venture that trusts in students and entrusts them with the establishment of a positive group dynamic.

I often have the opportunity to combine research, teaching, and a preoccupation with theory through work on facets of Golden Age literature and culture. As a *cervantista* with undeniably quixotic tendencies, I find myself attached at the hip to *Don Quijote*, my preferred locus for textual exempla to illustrate theoretical concepts, from the premodern to the postmodern. Cervantes writes into the narrative a history of literature that operates on diachronic and synchronic planes and that is simultaneously reverential and subversive, innovatively realistic and blatantly self-referential. The intertext of *Don Quijote* is enormous, and it becomes the intertext of a significant portion of the literary works and movements that follow, anticipating as it does the imaginative and theoretical issues of later fiction. There is essentially no development in narrative that does not have roots in *Don Quijote* and in the earlier writings that inform and punctuate its trajectory. The novel also provides glimpses into Spanish history, politics, economics, theology, social institutions and customs, and questions of gender. It offers theories of reading and writing, and contains, within its elastic and mercurial discourse, revolving doses of criticism, metacriticism, and confrontations between theory and praxis. It examines the most mysterious and pressing aspects of literature and its real-world correlatives, and, of course, the middle ground in which the two realms merge or become indistinguishable. Cervantes interrogates perception, perspective, truth, historiography, and countless other facets of art, agency, and human nature. The ultimate literary object is likewise an ideal vehicle for exploration of the world beyond, in part because the world beyond makes its way into the text. Early picaresque narrative sets a stage, of sorts, for *Don Quijote* by breaking from idealism and by self-consciously fashioning the protagonists and their stories. As art and as reflectors of society, the early modern feminine variations of the picaresque and the exemplary novellas of María de Zayas add an intricate and revealing gender inflection to the inner workings and to the analytical and analogical force of narrative.

I am going to switch now to the interrelation of text and context in the Hispanic short story. Dear Reader, I must ask for your indulgence, since I

will be concentrating on my own work product. I hope that you will see this as valuable and helpful, rather than self-serving; if not, I beg your pardon and excuse you from reading to the end. My guiding premise is that the study of literature is no longer dominated by formalism, and that old dichotomies, such as form and content, have for many years become more linked than separated. The signifier *text* refers to an abundance of signifieds, within and beyond the work (and world) of art. The fact that literature is vital to interdisciplinarity enriches what we teach and how we teach it. Going "beyond" the text is more involved and thornier than ever. We have more to show and more to tell, and our students can contribute more and, if we are fortunate, can learn more.

Undertaking a project that would result in a short-story anthology with tools for literary analysis and for the study of cultural contexts, I read a large quantity of stories by Spanish and Spanish American writers from the late nineteenth century onward. Although fairly long, this was not an unenjoyable task, but I had to—in proverbial terms—kiss many frogs before finding appropriate princesses. My criteria, broadly rendered, were to identify (1) outstanding stories, artistically conveyed and with some type of message; (2) stories that would be accessible to students with as few as four or five semesters of college Spanish; (3) a solid proportion of stories by men and women, including well-known and lesser-known authors, and representing a number of Spanish-speaking countries; and (4) a total package that would entertain, enlighten, and prepare students for more readings in—and with a critical eye on—Spanish and Spanish American literature and culture.

The text is *El cuento: Arte y análisis* (The Short Story: Art and Analysis), published by Prentice-Hall. The first part of the book contains an introduction, in English, to narrative analysis, in which key terms and concepts are presented. The section is designed to give students an overview of the analytical process, including the ideas and vocabulary associated with this process. The section is followed by questions on the content. The second part offers a survey of narrative analysis in Spanish. This is not a translation of the first part, but it provides a full view of analytical concepts, thus reinforcing the elements contained in the first part and allowing students to see the Spanish terms for critical commentary on narrative. The section is followed by vocabulary, vocabulary notes, and questions. The anthology consists of twenty-five stories by twenty-four authors from Spain and Spanish America (sixteen countries), including nine women writers. The format allows for—forces, it might be said—hands-on confrontation between the student and the text. There is an introduction to the author, a "Consideraciones preliminares" (Preliminary Considerations) section, and vocabulary notes preceding each selection, which in turn contain generous glosses. Each selection is self-contained, but the stories are presented in order of difficulty. A fundamental feature of the approach is the group of

four exercises following each story. Students simply cannot avoid reading the assignment if they are to complete the exercises. The first group ("Comprendiendo el lenguaje" / Understanding the Language) is based on vocabulary, thereby requiring students to familiarize themselves with the language of the text. The second group ("Siguiendo el hilo" / Following the Thread) focuses on plot, also requiring a close reading. The third and fourth groups ("Analizando el cuento" / Analyzing the Story, "Compartiendo ideas" / Sharing Ideas) emphasize, respectively, analysis of specific facets of the structure and contemplation of larger issues suggested by the story. An instructor need not assign all the exercises, but if students are assigned to write on the stories, they will have to prepare the material at home and come to class ready to discuss the stories. They will not be passive readers, but will have to engage directly with the texts, develop reading and critical skills, and learn to have confidence in their own ability as literary critics. I would like to give, briefly, my rationale for the selections.

"En manos de la cocinera" (In the Hands of the Cook) by Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936), one of Spain's most renowned figures, is the story of a bachelor about to marry an aristocratic young lady with a pompous and meddlesome mother. On the eve of the wedding, the protagonist falls from a horse and breaks his leg, and the ceremony must be postponed. The future mother-in-law insists that the reserved and docile bride-to-be can have no part in tending to the injured man, for this would be an affront to proper behavior and decorum. The task is left to a benevolent maid, who announces that she will leave the home after the marriage. The prospective groom reconsiders his situation and decides to back out of the engagement and marry his caregiver. The "ex-future mother-in-law" tells her daughter that nothing has been lost and that she has sensed all along the vulgar tastes of the fiancé. Unamuno invents a social fantasy in which kindness and good character trump prestige and bloodlines. Through the creation of a shrewish representative of high society and her trained-to-be-passive daughter, he satirizes the obsession with lineage, social category, and propriety that has marked Spanish society. The story is cleverly written, with special gems of arrogance emitted by a woman who fancies herself to be a grande dame and whose regard for appearances is nothing if not exaggerated. Students can observe the structure of the story, including the role of the narrator, the use of dialogue, and the language, and they can bear in mind the social implications of the plot and questions of respectability and compatibility. They can judge whether the story is realistic, idealistic, or a little of each as they compare Spanish society at the beginning of the twentieth century to U.S. society at the beginning of the twenty-first. The instructor may elect to address wide-ranging aspects of Unamuno the author, philosopher, and member of the Generation of 1898.

Ana María Matute (b. 1926) is a well-known Spanish novelist and short-story writer. In "La conciencia" (Conscience) a tramp shows up at an inn

and convinces the *posadera* (the innkeeper or innkeeper's wife), whose husband is away, to put him up on a stormy night, promising the leave the next morning. He later reneges on this promise, insisting that the woman let him stay because he has seen everything. She is unsure of his claims, but she is, in fact, having an affair, and so she puts up with his impertinence. He pushes her to the edge, demanding money and threatening to expose her. Her husband has returned, and she is in a state of perpetual fear. Finally, the tramp realizes that his prey is at the end of her rope, and he backs off. On leaving, he warns her to keep an eye on her husband, maintaining that no one has a clear conscience and implying that her husband also has secrets to hide. This is a simple story that makes one think, and the suspense and the dose of irony at the end are appealing. "La conciencia" gives the reader a glimpse into human nature with no heaviness or heavy-handedness. From the social perspective, all the characters are poor, but Matute make evident that there are hierarchies among the lower classes. The protagonist is in an unhappy marriage because her former suitor (and current lover) was so poor that she rejected his proposal of marriage. The tramp, the lowest of the low, achieves a victory of sorts over the *posadera*, who may or may not gain the reader's sympathy.

Class-consciousness lies at the heart of "El cock-tail" (The Cocktail Party) by Felicidad Blanc (Spain, 1914–1990). A man returns home from work and informs his wife that they have been invited to a cocktail party hosted by his boss. They are thrilled by the invitation, which they take as a sign of good things to come. Upward mobility may be in the game plan. The wife goes to some lengths to plan her outfit for the event. She has a suit perked up by her seamstress and borrows a red-feathered hat from her cousins for the occasion. The anticipation is marvelous. The couple can hardly sleep from excitement, and they become rather overconfident about their entry into high society. At the party, they feel uncomfortable from the start, truly fish out of water. They do not know how to socialize, and the other guests want nothing to do with them. The boss immediately realizes that he has made a mistake, and he speculates that his employee will be unbearable in the office for having mixed with the upper crust. He thinks badly of the wife, whom he labels *cursi* (affected, tacky). On the couple's trip home, rain intensifies their already dampened spirits. The symbolic hat is ruined. Once they have taken refuge in their apartment and in their shared humiliation, the husband notes that the others are probably just as unhappy as they. At the center of "El cock-tail" is the image of the cocktail party as depicted in Hollywood films. The writer brings in the perspectives of the husband, the wife, and the boss. The juxtaposition of anticipation and disillusionment gives the story its force. Readers can ponder such topics as social classes, expectations versus reality, happiness, solidarity, and even the rules of fashion.

Critique of the social elite reaches extreme heights in the absurdist

humor of "El pez único" (The One-of-a-Kind Fish) by the ingenious and eccentric Ramón Gómez de la Serna (Spain, 1888–1963). An exceptionally wealthy couple, demonstrably enamored of their possessions, invite a young gentleman with distinguished credentials to enjoy a meal with them. They show off their possessions. They are especially proud of a fish that is beautiful, costly, and the product of years of care and crossbreeding. The guest reacts to their pride and vanity by reaching into the aquarium, grabbing the fish, placing it in his mouth, and swallowing it in one gulp. The shocked and incensed owners order him to leave the house, insisting that he will never be welcome to dine there again. He, in turn, states that he has eaten sufficiently with the appetizer alone. The comeuppance of the idle rich serves as the story's center. Gómez de la Serna complements the plot with a vocabulary and style abundant in adjectives and cultured expressions. The affluent pair are depicted as automatons, who sit almost without movement as the money keeps rolling in. The story is a parody, hyperbolic in the extreme, but with a cautionary message, and the ending is certainly a surprise. The first four stories of *El cuento* are variations on the theme of social classes, and each exhibits a distinct tone and a distinct version of irony.

The Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas (1943–1990) was a fighter for intellectual freedom. "Con los ojos cerrados" (With His Eyes Closed), in a lighter vein than much of Arenas's work, tells the story from the point of view of an eight-year-old boy. One day, the narrator/protagonist's mother wakes him up early to get him ready for school. There is some commotion in the house because an aunt is about to take a trip and friends are going to come by to bid her farewell. On the way to school, the boy is easily distracted as he passes stores and sees other children playing. At a bridge, he decides to close his eyes, and from there his imagination reconfigures the steps that he had taken previously. Unfortunate incidents turn out well in the realm of the mind, until the boy is struck by a truck and ends up in the hospital. At the conclusion, he insists on the veracity of his account. The child's perspective, sensibility, and idiolect are crucial to the story. One can examine the creative process, the progression and reenactment, narrative reliability, and the symbolism of going through life blindly. Much of what the young boy witnesses stems from cruelty, and his rewriting of a painful present gives some gravity to the playfulness of the story and reminds the reader that children are by no means immune to pain, suffering, thoughtful reflection, or the need for escape. It is possible that Arenas is creating an analogue of the politics of his time and place.

Mercedes Ballesteros (Spain, 1913–1995) wrote novels and short stories, often from the perspective of a child. "Bufandita" (Scarfy, a nickname, from *bufanda*, scarf) and "Gregorio" are from a semi-autobiographical collection titled *Pasaron por aquí* (They Passed by Here). The narrator is a mature woman who recounts experiences and celebrates

acquaintances from her youth, with her brother as comrade and accomplice. The dual point of view is effective as a link between memory and the impact of the past on the present. The title character of "Bufandita" is a playmate of the narrator and her brother, a good-natured boy who obviously is from a more modest background than the other children. Bufandita's modesty and pleasant personality win him the narrator's admiration. Some years pass, and the children do not see each other, until one day the narrator spots him at a melon stand, hawking his goods and now with the beginnings of a moustache. She decides not to speak to him, a decision that has haunted her over time. As a woman, she calls to him, within the framework of the mind, stressing that she kept silent that day not because she was ashamed of him but because she was ashamed of life. In the story, Ballesteros adds another example to the treatment of social status. Here, sensitivity comes too late for Bufandita but not for the narrator or the reader. Awareness of and empathy for others—for differences—clearly are concerns of the author.

"Gregorio" has precisely the same deep structure as "Bufandita." The narrator/protagonist describes an episode from her youth, from a double point of view. Word reaches the brother and sister that a cousin (not blood-related) will be spending the summer with them. They begin to imagine that the boy is a monster, and they plot to keep their toys and other valuables away from him. They think that they know how he will look and speak, and the girl fears that he will kill their cat. When her brother reminds her that they do not have a cat, she responds that Gregorio would kill their cat if they had one. Fate intervenes. Gregorio contracts tuberculosis and dies. The children complain that their summer has been ruined, since they cannot have fun with their cousin, and they go into a type of mourning for him. Ballesteros captures beautifully the thought patterns and speech of the children, together with their sense of loss. Gregorio has lived in the memory of the narrator, whose outlook is melded with the immaturity of her former self. The structure, narrative scheme, and insights regarding time and identity can generate class discussion. Formally and conceptually, the stories by Ballesteros are primers on perspectivism.

Class, identity, and ethnicity come to the fore in "Zoo Island" by Tomás Rivera (1935–1984), born in Texas to parents originally from Mexico. Growing up as a migrant laborer, he received a doctorate and became chancellor of the University of California, Riverside. "Zoo Island" is a heartfelt story based in part on his early years. The protagonist is a fifteen-year-old who decides to take a census of the members of a community of migrant workers based in Iowa. The title comes from the feeling that outsiders—or, one might say, the insiders—view them as animals, to be stared at and ridiculed. The census gives the workers and their families a sense of pride, as it erases their anonymity and shows them to be more numerous than the citizens who live around them. In addition to the protagonist, other characters make their feelings and their complaints

known. The boy's father cannot stand being gawked at, and he curses the onlookers. A cantankerous old man, who suggests the name, recognizes that this is the start of something emblematic: when people are counted, they matter. Immigration and the influence of the growing Hispanic population in the United States are weighty and controversial issues, and the story lends itself to analysis from multiple perspectives. Rivera uses a third-person narrator but also re-creates the discourse of the migrant workers, most of whom, because of their circumstances, are uneducated. Tomás Rivera's exemplary life and the strength of his writings can serve to accentuate the importance of U.S. Hispanic literature and culture.

"Los hermanos" (The Brothers) by Gastón Suárez (Bolivia, 1928–1984) is about one's place in society, but with a twist. Two men meet at a train station. Each, coincidentally, is awaiting the arrival of his brother. In the first part of the story, the speaker is the wealthier of the two, successful in his career, with a loving wife and two children. He is in a position to make life comfortable for his brother. The second man is less conspicuously successful. He is not well-to-do, and he and his wife must support seven children on a meager income. His interlocutor reveals a sense of superiority. In the second part of the story, with third-person narration and dialogue, the reader becomes aware that the initial perceptions will prove false. The brother of the prosperous man has a terminal illness, and no amount of money can save him. The brother of the other man literally has struck gold, and the family now will reap the rewards. In this parable about the turns of fortune, Suárez highlights the smugness of the man who is headed for a tragic disappointment and the gentility of the man whose life will change for the better. Students can deliberate on questions of style and destiny.

Alfredo Bryce Echenique (Peru, b. 1939) has lived in his native country and in the United States, France, and Spain. A number of his works deal with the transition from youth to adulthood. In "La madre, el hijo y el pintor" (The Mother, the Son, and the Painter), his emphasis is on characterization, dialogue, and, notably, the effects of divorce. The "hijo" of the title is a teenager who splits his time between his parents, both of whom love him deeply but, he senses, breathe a sigh of relief each time he leaves to join the other. The mother in question is a woman who is attractive, youthful-looking, vain, and in the market for an attachment. It is probable that she would like for potential suitors to think that she is too young to have a teenage son. The good-hearted young man flatters her and caters to her whims, even to the point of agreeing to accompany her to the home of her current boyfriend, an artist, for a party that does not materialize. The situation leaves the three disenchanted, but not defeated. Life will go on. The presentation permits the reader to meditate on the plights of the parents, the painter, and especially the son. There are no antagonists here, but the divided loyalties affect all phases of the young man's life. He is the one who is underage, yet he must be solicitous of his mother; one cannot help but notice

the role reversal in these scenes. Bryce Echenique is admirably subtle in the description of the relationship between mother and son, and he treats a problem that impacts a sizeable portion of the population. Literature and society are inextricably bound in a story with universal application.

"Maria, *public relations*" (María, Public Relations Woman) by Francisco García Pavón (Spain, 1919–1989), is a clever story about how the title character excels at her job. The first-person narrator is a businessman from a small town charged by his father with considering the possibility of signing a contract with the company for which María works. What is unique about this particular enterprise is that María seems to be smitten with her client. Her enthusiasm, or, arguably, her passion, is palpable. She seems to have fallen in love. A slight obstacle arises when the young man overhears María on the phone with other men, and she appears to be as infatuated with them as she is with him. Consumed with jealousy, he chastises her, and she confesses her "tragedy": in her position, she must animate, encourage, and light a fire under an inordinate number of clients, with Sunday as her only day of rest. Struck by her declaration and by the ensuing tears, he signs the contract, which she puts in her blouse. As he leaves, he can hear a victorious cry of relief from María's office. García Pavón balances psychology with humor as he constructs the story and the narrative voice. The small-town businessman knows that he has been deceived, but he describes the events in such a way as to allow the reader to comprehend his excitement at the attention cast upon him by María, who makes him forget, momentarily at least, the responsibility that he owes to his father and the girlfriend that he has left behind. María's travails and actions are, needless to say, gender-inflected. Students need to read carefully to understand the nuances of language and irony in the story, which has much to say about love and perhaps more to say about public and private relations.

In "El rescate" (The Rescue), Gilda Holst (Ecuador, b. 1952) employs similar elements in a different context. A woman is spending an afternoon at the beach with her family. She spots a little girl who seems to be drowning, and she swims to her and brings her to safety, leaving the child unharmed on the sand and going about her business. Soon she is overtaken by the girl's parents and brother, who want to acknowledge her heroism. The woman is embarrassed by the effusive thanks and only wants to sit in the sun. When the mother insists that they do something for her, the reluctant heroine says, "Bueno, . . . invíteme a un helado" (Okay, treat me to some ice cream). She instantly regrets having made the request, but it is too late. The mother is insulted. The blemished heroine is mortified. Usually a model of self-control, she barks at the onlookers. She recalls an episode from her youth when she saw the movie *Spartacus* with her nanny, who caused a scene when she cried hysterically at the demise of the rebel Thracian slave, and she herself begins to cry, thinking of her nanny and of her own unexpected predicament. The story ends when the rescued girl's mother tells her to calm

down and hands her some ice cream. There is some depth to the laughter that may derive from reading the selection. Discussion can be built around the depiction of the protagonist, heroism, political correctness, and the question of who is entitled to display emotions.

"El asco" (Revulsion, or Disgust) by Silvina Ocampo (Argentina, 1906–1993), is a complex yet comical story about love, attraction, and repulsion. The female protagonist enjoys creature comforts, but she is unhappy in her marriage. She feels only disgust for her husband, who has tried to win her over. She pushes herself to conquer this repugnance by sheer force of will, and she finally succeeds. As luck would have it, however, the turnaround leads to neglect on the part of the husband, who stays out all night and takes up with other women. As a consequence, the wife lets herself and her "doll's house" go to pot. Only when her profound loathing for the man returns does he begin to woo her again. He presents her with a costly ring, which seems to satisfy her. The story is narrated by the protagonist's hairdresser, who may or may not have had an affair with the husband. The narrator's voice is superbly shrewd and ambivalent as it conveys the ups and downs of marriage and the laws of courtship before and after the wedding ceremony. Ocampo may be commenting on the rhetoric and the ironies of feminine psychology, but her artistic instincts may win out in this story, which skillfully vacillates between optimism and pessimism, insight and mystery, and expectations and surprises. The protagonist and the narrator, by no means idealized, hardly seem to be created in the author's image.

"Corazonada" (Gut Feeling) is a popular short story by the prolific Uruguayan writer Mario Benedetti (1920–2009). The most captivating element of the story may be the invention of the first-person narrative voice. If Silvina Ocampo seems nothing like her narrator in "El asco," Benedetti indisputably is detached from his narrator, Celia, a woman who seeks a job as a maid in the home of an upper-middle-class family in Montevideo. The lady of the house hires her, but with many admonitions about the strict code of conduct. It is, in fact, the behavior of the son that causes problems. His advances toward Celia place her job in jeopardy. Celia takes much abuse from her employer, but finally reaches her limit when the *señora* slaps her in the face. Celia may not be educated, but she is sharp and practical, and she leaves the house with an incriminating photo and letter, and she makes sure that her young suitor can track her down. He pursues her, but she does not give in until, against her family's wishes, he promises to marry her. Celia's calculations, complete with a blackmail scheme, yield her two rewards: a husband and a move upward in society. The story ends with a humorous encounter, in a department store, between the new bride and her mother-in-law, and Celia, continuing to be driven by gut feelings, emerges victorious. Benedetti satirizes the obsession with social status by empowering his lower-class protagonist and giving her a strong voice. His own powerfully ironic voice-over suggests a pat on his back as well as hers. The revenge-of-

the-household-help motif gives impetus to social engagement and to humor. In Benedetti's virtuoso narrative performance, ventriloquism is both dazzling and manipulative, as the author inhabits and distances himself from Celia. "Corazonada" displays a masterful cross of medium and message and of the serious and the comic, and students may want to think about a potential feminist subtext.

Guido Rodríguez Alcalá (Paraguay, b. 1946) has a background in law and literature, and the two come into play in "Libertad condicionada" (Conditional Freedom), a political satire with weighty meaning. The narrator/protagonist is an attorney who finds himself incarcerated. The prison is patently overcrowded, and white-collar detainees and dissidents are placed with hardened criminals. The lawyer recognizes that he is in a fortunate position; he has money to pay off guards, and he can offer his colleagues his legal services. His cellmate, in contrast, is a poor man with no recourses and no defenses; he is, in fact, not the guilty party, but is being held hostage while police search for his brother. The brilliance of the story lies in the narration proper. The narrator describes graft, beatings, torture, unbearable conditions, inequalities, misguided aid from do-gooders, and so forth, but he does so in a manner that understates everything. Students will not easily detect the strong current of irony that underlies the discourse, and they must grasp the irony in order to see the message of the text. The poor cellmate, for example, faces a dead end. He cannot remain in jail nor, with no means of support, can he live on the outside. His solution is to start a fight with a guard, which places him back under arrest. The warden observes that some people simply do not appreciate their freedom. There is a wonderful lesson in rhetorical analysis in "Libertad condicionada." The author leaves markers for interpretation, hidden at times within the irony of the discourse. One must first perceive how the information is being transmitted and then uncover the message. In this case, the criticism directed against authoritarian regimes, social injustice, and the prison system is disclosed in a literary manner, fusing art and commentary.

"El regalo" (The Gift) by Julieta Pinto (Costa Rica, b. 1921) unveils another type of irony. The protagonist is a poor woman whose life has been a succession of trials and abuses. Orphaned at an early age, she is taken in by a heartless neighbor who immediately puts her to work. She has no time for school or for play with other children, who taunt her mercilessly. From age ten, she labors in the fields, with no affection or encouragement to give her peace. In her fifteenth year, she develops into an attractive young woman and is noticed by men on the basis of her physical attributes. She is so pleased by the attention and the companionship, albeit fleeting, that she accepts the men who want to be with her. The ostracism continues, and the young woman is left to care for four children. An illness puts her in the hospital, and when she is released, she learns that three of her children have been taken away. She lives in abject poverty with her youngest child, a son

who is the light of her life. By chance, she comes into contact with a kind lady who bestows on her what she had never encountered: kindness, friendship, support. She is immensely grateful and wants to give the lady something in return. She offers her only thing of value, her son. At the story's end, she returns home from her friend's house with the son. To her great surprise and relief, the gift has not been accepted. Pinto sets forth an intense and emotionally charged portrait of the outsider, who is an orphan, a child laborer, and a single mother. "El regalo" invites the reader to glance beneath the surface of all members of society and to ponder the symbolism of the one good soul who comes to the protagonist's aid.

The noted Venezuelan writer Rómulo Gallegos (1884–1969), author of *Doña Bárbara*, treats the theme of the outsider in "El piano viejo" (The Old Piano). At the center of the story is Luisana, who stays in the family home when her brothers and sisters disperse. Neither attractive nor gifted in a traditional sense, and certainly underappreciated, Luisana keeps the house and her combative siblings in order. Her influence is strong yet almost imperceptible. On her death, the brothers and sisters gather in the home, and a fight erupts. Suddenly, a solitary note sounds on the piano, and this has a calming effect as it evokes the presence, and the pacifying nature, of Luisana. There is a type of revisionist history at work in "El piano viejo." Luisana has been written out of the picture, but her passing brings a posthumous respect and gratitude on the part of her family. The story is about family dynamics, individual worth, and life's hidden treasures, and the piano adds an agreeable supernatural touch that may be a starting point for discussion.

Juan José Arreola (Mexico, 1918–2001), best known for his short stories, updates the Faust theme in "Un pacto con el diablo" (A Pact with the Devil). The locus of the attempted pact is a movie theater, in which the first-person narrator meets the devil in disguise, as they watch a film about a man who sells his soul to the devil. The unhappy conclusion of the film propels the protagonist out of the theater and out of the reach of the antagonist. The tantalizing offer, which promised to take the man and his wife out of poverty, seems, on second thought, guaranteed to lead to pain and unhappiness. In this retelling, the intended victim sees his story projected onscreen, and the movie serves as a foreshadowing and as a deterrent. The story can lead to a discussion of intertextuality, of the subgenre of parable, of human nature, and of things that may be too good to be true.

In "El viaje de novios" (The Honeymoon), the Spanish writer Javier Marías (b. 1951) makes a bold literary gesture. He takes some five pages from his novel titled *Corazón tan blanco* (A Heart So White) and converts them into a short story, with the premise that, isolated and in a new frame, their meaning will be altered. In the story, a newlywed couple are in a hotel in Sevilla on their honeymoon. The wife feels indisposed and rests in bed. Her husband looks out the window and catches sight of a woman, apparently

angry and distraught, who seems to be trying to communicate with him. She does not look familiar to him, but she stares at him knowingly. He has not been in the city before, yet the stranger disturbs and alarms him. As the story ends, he believes that she is making her way to the room, with him as the target of her wrath. Suspense, the imagination, always-impending evil, and fear dominate the story, and the reader must be mindful, too, of the experiment—or, one might say, trick—being perpetrated by the author, who makes the reading spiritedly interactive.

The inexplicable force of the imagination, explored by Marías, is a primary ingredient of "Una señora" (A Lady), by José Donoso (Chile, 1924–1996), author of the surrealist novel *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* (The Obscene Bird of Night). The first-person narrator of "Una señora" becomes enchanted, for reasons that he himself cannot understand, by a woman whom he observes on a streetcar. She is about fifty years old, of average appearance, with no distinguishing features; she is wearing a green overcoat and holding a wet umbrella. He spots her on other occasions in the city, or so he thinks, and he begins actively to look for her. At some point, her image vanishes from his mind. He does not forget her, but she becomes blurred in his mind with the population at large. He awakes one morning with the sensation that the lady is dying. The next day he checks the obituaries in the paper and believes that he has found the announcement of her death. He goes to the cemetery and pays tribute to her. He notes that he thinks of her now only rarely and wonders if perchance he may run into her again. Donoso puts the reader in the position of analyzing the events based on the words of the man with the active imagination. Students may meditate on reality, illusion, dream worlds, and instinct as they scrutinize the author's handling of discourse by a narrator who may not be of sound mind.

The Mexican writer Amparo Dávila (b. 1928) likewise depends on the confusion of reality and the imagination in "La celda" (The Cell), which has a markedly feminine, or feminist, cast. The protagonist is a young woman with high rank and financial stability, but also with a secret that she hides from her family. She endures the daily routine of social engagements and visits, and she even becomes engaged to a well-connected suitor and initiates plans for the wedding. The prospect of marriage becomes more and more distasteful to her, and she dreads spending time with her fiancée. Deep down, she is delighted when he announces that he must travel on business to New York, and dejected when his plans change. A New Year's Eve celebration is held in honor of the upcoming double wedding of the two daughters in the family, but the protagonist, elegantly dressed, is pale, somber, and taciturn. Her thoughts wander to the only place where she feels happiness, and the text ends with a paragraph in italics, in which her unmediated voice is heard. She is in a cold and dark room awaiting a figure that she calls "él." The story hinges on the identity of this mystifying lover or tormentor and on the symbolism implicit in the room ("the cell") and in

the actions of the young woman around whom it is constructed. In this story about the imagination that leaves much to the imagination of the reader, Dávila asks questions that she answers in the vaguest of terms. This can lead to a discussion of the intersections of feminism and literature, of *machismo*, and of the combination of conventions (social commentary, mystery, horror, stream of consciousness).

Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina, 1899–1986) is the consensus master of the Latin American short story, and his influence on the development of narrative is undeniable. "Emma Zunz" focuses on the plan of the title character to take vengeance on the man whom she considers responsible for her father's death. Aarón Loewenthal masterminded a plot to incriminate his colleague. Emma Zunz's father has fled and later died. Emma, in turn, concocts a stratagem that will combine justice and revenge. One step is to enter a bar frequented by sailors. Posing as a prostitute, she allows herself to be picked up, and she sacrifices her virginity. She invents an excuse to see Loewenthal, shoots him, and calls the police to report her violation by him. Justice is thus served through irony. Borges includes a number of details about the circumstances of the original crime and Emma's preparations and calculations. His story invites an examination of the concept of poetic justice, and this is one of his relatively few works that feature a female protagonist. Among the many points of interest is the way in which the narrator tells the story, which surely will make readers want to go over in their minds the issues raised by the absorbing and disturbing plot.

A companion piece to Amparo Dávila's "La celda," but also with a crime to be avenged, "La muñeca menor" (The Youngest Doll), by the noted Puerto Rican writer Rosario Ferré (b. 1942), can be seen as a type of allegory. The main character of "La muñeca menor" is the beloved aunt to nine nieces, for each of whom she makes a new life-sized doll each year. In her youth, the aunt—the member of an aristocratic family—was bitten by a fish and, although treated by a doctor, was never cured. Her plans for an active life evaporated, and she dedicated herself to her nieces and the dolls. Special mention is made of the detail that goes into the making of each doll, and the eyes receive the most attention. As each of the young women marries, the aunt gives the bride the latest doll made in her honor. It is now the doctor's son who visits her monthly and who asks for the hand of the youngest niece. The older doctor admits to his son that he could have cured the aunt, but that his visits over the years have been quite profitable. The newlyweds move to town, where the doctor keeps his wife on display on the balcony of their residence; her beauty and her family's prestige draw clients. Years pass, and the doctor becomes rich. People come from far and wide to view his lovely wife. In a magnificent and perplexing ending, the wife and her doll—"la muñeca menor"—become one to retaliate for the crime committed against the aunt. This is a story that cries out for interpretive strategies, and students can address the symbolism of the dolls (and their

eyes) and the references to sickness, pain, and suffering, and to the medical establishment, to class, and to the feminism that seems to lie at its base. Ferré puts the objectification of women into a literary vehicle and complements the realism of the plot with elements borrowed from horror fiction and film. It is interesting to see how male members of the class respond to the story.

The Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío (1867–1916), the most celebrated *modernista* (from *modernismo*, the modernist movement), wrote a number of short stories. "Mi tía Rosa" (My Aunt Rosa) is filled with linguistic flourishes, romanticism, nostalgia, wit, and, without doubt, irony. The narrator is the adult Roberto, who describes an event that took place when he was sixteen years old. He has fallen in love with a cousin, one year younger. His parents are distraught. They scold him in the harshest of terms. Love at his age! Ridiculous! They chastise him for doing poorly in school and for showing no sense of responsibility. Their solution to the problem is to send Roberto to the countryside, where he will be separated from the young lady and perhaps gain some maturity. He is miserable, and his only consolation comes from his Aunt Rosa, who has loved and lost, but who gives him hope. She is a genuine romantic, and she eggs her nephew on with allusions to mythology and to the purity and splendor of youthful love. Her words are exquisite, and she sees Roberto as a kindred spirit who will be saved by her encouragement. Roberto goes to the country. He quickly forgets about his love object and sees her only once later on, "ya viuda y llena de hijos" (now a widow with lots of children). He never again sees his aunt, who, with her glorified images of love, has gone to the other world. He ends the narrative by sending her a kiss from this world. There is an art-for-art's-sake quality to the flowery language of the story, but Darío adds humor and an ironic reversal to the proceedings. Students can decide whether art is at the service of plot, or vice versa, and they can comment on the play of contrasts and the multi-layered representation of love in the story.

"El Vengador Errante contra el enemigo público número uno" (The Errant Avenger versus Public Enemy Number One), by Fanny Buitrago (Colombia, b. 1940), is an allegory and cautionary tale about the rise of technology. The narrator/protagonist is a mild-mannered librarian and a fervent admirer of books. He works in the National Library, which, he laments, is sacrificing its official duty to serve and protect books in favor of increased demands for technology and for activities that are, at best, marginal to the traditional functions of a library. Complaining about a series of new administrative hires, he considers himself to be a moral and intellectual compass of society; others want to write books out of the picture, and this annoys him no end. Books are present in all aspects of his life. He takes books home to read and enjoy with his wife. Disappointments—to him, catastrophes—mount, at the library and at home. No one can be trusted. Computers and televisions threaten books, and the protagonist takes action

by adopting the role of the Errant Avenger, destroying the machines before they can eliminate books. And, what is more, he is triumphant, and he eludes the police. The mission will continue. At the conclusion of the story, there is still hope for the book. The reader of "El Vengador Errante" needs to recognize the author's playfulness in the creation of the unconventional protagonist—an unapologetic bibliophile and a modern-day and pedantic Robin Hood—and his narrative voice. Students, used to high technology, conceivably will relate more to the "enemies" of the hero than to the commitment to books and libraries. Discussion can focus in part on education, on the advantages and disadvantages of technology, and on the ways in which knowledge is imparted.

In organizing the material in *El cuento*, I tried first to work on aids to comprehension of the material and of the tools of textual analysis, then to provide a selection of stories that would be appealing and instructive, and finally to provide guides and exercises to facilitate learning and discussion. As I formulated the progression, I thought of language, literature, cultural studies (that is, the inclusion of topics beyond what may be deemed formalist approaches), homework assignments, and class dialogue. I wanted to include stories that would represent the Hispanic world, its varied customs and institutions, and its abundance of gifted writers. Because *El cuento* is geared toward undergraduate students who are learning Spanish, I needed to respect the background and skill level of those who would be using the book. Experience has taught me, nonetheless, that undergraduates can grasp complex and profound concepts if these points are introduced as clearly and as straightforwardly as possible (for example, without an excess of theoretical jargon). The stories in the anthology cover considerable ground and fall into certain thematic clusters: social classes, codes of conduct, identity, the outsider, the imagination, visions and versions of reality, gender issues, intertextuality, and a changing world, among others. Some of these topics are universal in scope, whereas others pertain to national and/or Hispanic issues. One basic element is the substance of each story and its relation to how the story is narrated; the link between content and perspective is crucial. This dialectics is the backbone, so to speak, of the comprehensive structure or design of the story. There is always a tension among perspectives. Analogously, there is always a subtext or subtexts worth investigating, and that factor opens the parameters of reading and discussion of the social order, sensibilities, preoccupations, and an assortment of polemical topics.

I referred earlier to the underlying rhetoric on which poststructuralism depends. The most prevalent rhetorical marker in the stories—and, I would argue, in any first-rate story—is irony, noteworthy for its presence and for its variations. The rhetoric and the irony forge a place for readers, who may develop—and develop confidence in—their critical skills at an early stage in their academic pursuits. Literature courses naturally will be different from

courses in history, philosophy, or psychology, but the subject matter encompasses the world at large and its people. New approaches to texts can be accommodated in literature classes and can broaden the range of items on the pedagogical agenda. Formalism gives students of literature basic analytical tools and a competitive edge over those in other disciplines. Contextual considerations, including cultural studies, add dimensions to the tasks at hand. The interaction between text and context brings greater interest and relevance to dialogues on literature, with the presupposition—to my mind, correct—that one cannot talk productively about art without talking about life. That is not a new or radical thought, but new (and sometimes radical) theories can sharpen and invigorate the practice of teaching literature. When one teaches literature in Spanish, the challenges mount, but so can the benefits. Like Ginger Rogers dancing backwards and in high heels, students are able to follow the steps and extend their horizons by viewing the world from unaccustomed angles.

The textbook that I have described and the course that I have outlined do not aim for theoretical sophistication, but they strive to make text and context function in tandem, as compatible components of the analysis of fiction. A given text has, in a sense, multiple identities, multiple ways of being viewed. What we sometimes denominate as the object of study is concurrently stable and unstable, "frozen" in print and open to interpretation. Furthermore, the goals of interpretation vary and are, in general, more diverse and expansive than in the past, thanks to the escalation of theory and interdisciplinarity, and thanks to the self-consciousness instilled in us by poststructuralism and its aftermath. It is not only our professional colleagues and the deepest thinkers in our field, but also our students, often our superiors in technology, who motivate us to shift gears when necessary, and rightly so.

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