

◆ Introduction

The Centrality of Literature in the Quest for a Liberal Education

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The present volume of *Hispanic Issues Online* was conceived some time ago, the result of conversations about the current state of the humanities and, in particular, of Spanish and Spanish American literature and culture programs within the larger context of a liberal education. Underpinning those discussions was a shared conviction that literary studies continue to have a role to play in expanding students' understanding of both the aesthetic experience and the complexities of human lives in different historical and sociocultural settings. While the same claim could also be made for visual cultural artifacts, the case for the continued relevance of literary studies rests on, among other factors, literature's powerful and imaginative uses of language to various effects, and the sense that in sharpening students' critical skills and perhaps even transforming their thinking, it has the potential of making them more reflective members of the multiple communities to which they belong.

This volume is neither an effort to advocate for a canon, nor an attempt to question old or new approaches to literature and culture. The Spanish and Latin American literary texts discussed in these pages encompass different genres, historical periods, and national literatures. Some of them are not even part of the established versions of the Hispanic canon, as in the case of the novels cited by Gonzalo Navajas (in this volume), who looks at the function of works by Manuel Azaña, Javier Cercas, and Arturo Pérez-Reverte as cultural objects that underscore the links between present and past historical circumstances. Those links also guide David R. Castillo (in this volume), who discusses the most canonical of novels, *Don Quijote*, in a way that recognizes "trans-historical bridges" (32). Castillo revisits the place of the classics in today's humanities classroom and seeks to deemphasize the "monumental tradition" that emanated from projects of national construction

in favor of more current preoccupations and concerns. Yet his discussion of *Don Quijote* through the lenses of popular culture via a number of road movies is also a way of rereading a classic with fresh eyes, keeping in mind Walter Benjamin's notion that "a historical reality must address the 'state of emergency' in which we live" (31). An interesting observation is also made concerning Cervantes's reflections about the culture industry of his own time and how they can be made relevant if they "brush against the grain of our own mass culture," shining a light, one might say, on certain mechanisms of representation, and thus reminding us of the ever-present manipulative uses of art in the creation of a model of life.

Navajas, too, touches on the importance of film in these discussions, and cinema becomes the centerpiece of Enric Bou's essay (both in this volume). Bou focuses on a number of Pedro Almodóvar's films as texts that allow us to experience a Spain in a constant state of transition, marked by a culture that is essentially hybrid, in contrast to the myth of a unitary entity propagated earlier by Francoist ideologues through the culture industry. In some ways, these deconstructive proposals remind us of Cervantes's own dialog with Lope de Vega's *Comedia Nueva* and, most especially, his cautionary note about the facile consumption of cultural artifacts that served propagandistic purposes in their structuration of pliable subjects.

While this volume largely focuses on literature, the training of students in conscious, alert *readings* of texts—as opposed to facile consumption—need not be limited to a specific type of symbolic product. Thus, arguing for the continued relevance of literary studies in a liberal arts curriculum does not imply turning a blind eye to films and other examples of visual and aural culture (television, video clips, photographs, songs, and so on)—and their complex history of interconnectedness with the written word. In the end, an important consideration for professional academics is how to contribute to the education of students who function in societies that are increasingly saturated with messages, how to train them to become discerning "readers" or active participants in the production of meaning.

A slightly different, though complementary, perspective on this subject is offered by Roy Ketchum (in this volume), through a reading of Argentine novelist and critic Ricardo Piglia, for whom the necessity of literature (the novel, in his case) stems from its power to engage, reconstruct, and give shape to various networks of social fictions, all the while providing "alternative stories in combat with the State's version of events" (173). What these ideas have in common is the importance given to interpretation in the quest for knowledge. Active reading of literature has the potential to challenge what Spanish philosopher Daniel Innerarity calls the "communicative and reproductive transparence" of dominant ideology, a way of thinking that favors the kinds of scientific knowledge that "are easily translatable into technological apparatuses and immediate economic gain."

Innerarity speaks to the general role of interpretation in the age of information and what is at stake for democratic societies. That is, he underscores the fundamental epistemological value of the humanities in a context characterized by a combination of great uncertainty and massive flow of stimuli and data. The entire quote is worth reproducing:

La ideología dominante es la transparencia comunicativa y reproductiva, como si para la lectura correcta de los datos bastara un código correspondiente. Este modo de pensar tiende a menospreciar el momento de interpretación que hay en todo conocimiento, favorece los saberes científicos y fácilmente traducibles en aparatos tecnológicos, la rentabilidad económica inmediata, mientras que infravalora otro tipo de conocimientos como los artísticos, intuitivos, prácticos o relacionales. Conviene examinar este asunto porque no nos jugamos aquí tan solo el porvenir de las humanidades, sino el destino de nuestras comunidades políticas . . . Este es el verdadero desafío de nuestro tiempo: interpretar para obtener experiencias a partir de los datos y sentido a partir de los discursos. Y es aquí donde las ciencias humanas y sociales se hacen valer como especialistas de sentido, como saberes que producen y evalúan significación.

(The dominant ideology is one of communicative and reproductive transparency, as if the only thing needed for the correct reading of data were a corresponding code. This kind of thinking tends to ignore the moment of interpretation present in all knowledge, favoring scientific approaches that are easily converted into technology and immediate financial gain while underestimating other kinds of knowledge: artistic, intuitive, practical or relational. It is important to put this matter into question, for what is at stake is not only the future of humanities, but the very fate of our political communities . . . This is the real challenge of our time: interpreting in order to obtain experiences from data, and meaning from discourses. It is in this sense that human and social sciences are valuable as specialists in meaning, as fields that produce and evaluate meaning.)

We believe that those of us working in the academy would agree that in our present circumstances, the discussion about the meaning of what we do as teachers and scholars acquires a new urgency. Amid generalized uncertainty and a prolonged economic crisis, the usefulness and value of the humanities in general and, in particular, of literature and culture programs, have come into question. While this is not exactly new, the matter of use value has been a recurring motif within the context of precarious economic scenarios. What seems to have changed is a longstanding implicit agreement among

university faculty and administrators that literature and the arts deserve a rightful place in a liberal arts education. It now appears that the latter view can no longer be taken for granted, as demonstrated by the recent demise of a number of arts and humanities departments at institutions of higher learning, as the present fiscal crisis is viewed as an opportunity to retrench and reshape programs, tangible proof that “this time the threat is real” (see Navajas in this volume). Moreover, such a menace is by no means confined to the United States, as Bradley J. Nelson (in this volume) reminds us from Canada. The increasing focus on short-term market needs that Nelson and others deplore, and the growing view of the University as a place to train professionals, often at the expense of educating citizens, signals a trend that is raising thoughtful voices of concern. Notable among them is that of philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who argues that as a result of the current tendency to undermine the humanities, “the future of the world’s democracies hangs in the balance” (2). Although the diagnoses about the current situation vary, there seems to be a fairly wide consensus among those devoted to teaching and research in these areas, that the humanities remain central to the civic and spiritual wellbeing of individuals and societies. Moreover, one could say, with George Steiner, that “the eclipse of the humanities, in their primary sense and presentness, in today’s culture and society, implicates that of the humane” (49).

In line with what has been said thus far, it might be useful to convey to our students an understanding of culture as a relational, productive process, rather than a mere repository or archive. As the late Spanish art theorist José Luis Brea argued, this conception of culture sees cultural memory not as preservation of a lost moment, but as a system of infinite potentialities derived from the connective possibilities within the archive. We would add that both the care and management of the humanistic repository and the exploitation of its possibilities require a critical knowledge of its history and inner workings, something which entails a set of linguistic skills. Literature and its study offer a “forcefield” in which the representation of, and reflection on, the perpetual tension between the individual and the community, as mediated by language (whose importance is underscored by David William Foster in this volume), continue to be crucial components in the formation of aware citizens as we witness the development of new ways of presenting the same old issues that haunt humans lives.

For those who are still interested in the study of literature, the reading and interpretation of texts—old and new, classical and popular—is at the basis of a humanistic education. The classics, even as they seem to have lost their once privileged status within the academy, invite constant rereadings (Borges) and never quite exhaust the process of telling (Calvino). As proven companions to multiple generations of readers, their attraction goes beyond what is often associated with the cultural capital of a particular language or

nation: their reception over time and across transnational linguistic boundaries is subject to change, as they are read from one's frame of reference or particular perspectives. Moreover, those rereadings enrich the text and open it to new interpretative possibilities. At the same time that we help our students engage a corpus of symbolic production (in our case, "Hispanic literatures") and persuade them of their relevance, it is also useful to divest those "monuments" of the status acquired over centuries of institutional canonization. It is in this task that "theory" can play a fundamental role as a metacritical companion to close reading. The exercise of "rarifying" a text, the tradition to which it is ascribed, and the reasons to include it in the curriculum, is not only a matter of academic self-awareness, but can also serve as an example of the kind of analyses that will help students to approach critically the flood of information surrounding them.

To return to the general problems affecting our disciplines, one might argue that they cannot be blamed entirely on the shortsightedness of some (not all) modern-day administrators who reallocate resources following a corporate model—focusing on quantifiable areas of strength while shedding or marginalizing what is not considered productive or crucial to achieving certain institutional goals. In the case of literature and culture programs, a good measure of self-examination is needed if we are to argue for the continued importance of our work in the education of students. Within the fields of Hispanism, as in other literature and culture areas, there has been a veritable explosion of knowledge. Similarly, the turn to theory, which has contributed substantially to the scope and sophistication of our intellectual practices, might also have brought with it a less-than-desirable side effect: the perception of our disciplines as a collection of introspective, autonomous, and even dismissive endeavors with no sense of what's going on "out there." Of course, we know this is not true; or, at least, we know that it is not totally accurate. But, engulfed as we often are in the "latest debates" or worried about the (always disputable) "cutting-edge" angle of our contributions, we could well lose sight of the vital connection between what we do as scholars and what we do as teachers. It is precisely in the lack of fluid dialogue between those two sides of our mission that the greatest fault may be found. Another point of contention is that in our full embrace of cultural studies, we have not always attended to discussions that are also text-based and more broadly connected to the political in a larger societal context.

Recently, there have been renewed discussions regarding the importance of literature, the reasons why literature still matters, and its potential to engage readers in a multiplicity of ways. Jean-Jacques Lecercle argues for a paradigm of political criticism in which literature is taken into consideration as a "field of knowledge" that is "central to . . . philosophical concerns" (917). His case for a return to the political strikes a chord with those who believe that literary criticism as practiced in today's academy is often too

atomized and alienated from larger social and political issues. Lecercle argues that “the ideological tenets of neoliberalism (generalized contractualism; the primacy of ethics, especially from the point of view of the victim; individualism, methodological and ethical; and the restriction of politics to identity politics) no longer form the inevitable structure of a *pensée unique*.” For Lecercle, “politics, in its collective and agonistic aspects, is the form our being together as a society takes, [so] that literature cannot help being concerned with it, and that literary criticism must take these facts into account” (917). Literature is posited not as a reflection (in the old Marxist sense), but as “an active concept” that intervenes “in the historical, political, and historical conjunctures” (919).

Literature as a field of knowledge that is key to philosophical concerns is also the subject of Stephanie Merrim’s wide-ranging essay (in this volume), in which she highlights the importance of existentialism in major Spanish American and Brazilian fiction, speculates about the absence from the curriculum of texts that are identified with it, and suggests that present-day literature students might benefit from an engagement with philosophical and aesthetic concerns that not only attracted past generations of Latin American writers, but also find resonance in our own postmodern world, especially in reference to the devaluation of “surety and closure”. One might add in passing that such a devaluation could also be observed in earlier literary and philosophical proposals, as seen, respectively, in the major disruptions posed to modern rationalism by the writings of Cervantes and the thinking of Spinoza and Leibniz. The texts that Merrim discusses speak to literature’s ability to—more effectively than philosophy—“track individual lives in context, or, as Jean-Paul Sartre would say, in *situation*; address the total individual, including actions, thoughts, feelings, body, and becoming” (94).

Literature’s potential for meaningful engagement with the world around us is also explored in Margarita Zamora’s analysis (in this volume) of some of the writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas, writings in which the writer engaged in a “life-changing dialog” with himself to arrive at specific actions aimed at contesting the basic tenets of the Spanish colonial system. Zamora demonstrates that the well-known Dominican friar and *ex-encomendero*, who was to become a true champion of indigenous rights, exposed and criticized injustice in the best tradition of humanistic practice, and argues that the value of reading Las Casas today resides in the fact that those readings “can stimulate reflection and motivate action on the crises of the present” (111). The power of literature in this sense is also highlighted in Emil Volek’s discussion of José Martí’s *Nuestra América* (in this volume), which, in a broader sense, speaks to its ability to touch readers on multiple levels, whether emotional, intellectual, or political. Martí’s work is seen as a clear case of literature as an “active concept” (to borrow Lecercle’s earlier

observation) whose influence in the societal configuration of Latin America cannot be underestimated. With its emphasis on the problematics of textual transference, Volek's essay also serves as a reminder of the importance of scrupulous editorial work, especially when dealing with a text, such as *Nuestra América*, that is heavily grounded in culture and politics.

Throughout the various contributions to this volume, it is made clear that engaging specific literary texts means opening up dialogues between the present and the past, between the present and the absent, between our students and a world that may focus on, but is not necessarily limited to, their immediate surroundings. Moreover, the essays suggest that literature, films, and related cultural artifacts have the potential to expand our students' understanding of the complexities of human lives in different historical and sociocultural settings, while also provoking aesthetic enjoyment and a sense of discovery, of self and other. Bradley J. Nelson (in this volume) gives us a precise exposition of the sort of political and economic context that we are facing and argues that a liberal education can be a fundamental tool for understanding "the relationship between aesthetic wit and political obscurantism." As an example of how a fresh look at "ancient" and "foreign" texts can shed light on urgent problems of our times, he analyzes aspects of the rampant violence against women as portrayed in two works which may initially seem very alien to each other: Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* trilogy (an international bestseller written in Sweden at the beginning of the twenty-first century) and María de Zayas's *Desengaños Amorosos* (a series of novellas written in seventeenth-century Spain that today are rarely read outside of university courses). Michelle M. Hamilton (in this volume) discusses an even older text, Don Juan Manuel's "Exemplo XI" from the *Libro del Conde Lucanor*, and touches on Jorge Luis Borges's version of the tale. Her essay problematizes current notions related to tradition and authority, and reminds us that great literature is always a contemporary of its readers.

One could argue that literary works by themselves have no inherent power to affect the worldviews of students, or that they make no significant imprint on student sensibilities without previous preparation. Jonathan Mayhew (in this volume) speaks of the importance of receptivity, defining it as "the capacity to receive and experience the most accomplished products of the human intelligence" (158) and an ability to respond intellectually, emotionally, and affectively "to a wide range of visual art, music, literature, and systems of thought from any and all human cultures" (158). While it is clear that "receptivity" is an asset in itself, its "instrumental" value, so to speak, is also becoming apparent to people outside our disciplines. For example, leading business schools abroad are becoming increasingly aware of the added value of humanistic study, a sign of hope for the positive reevaluation of the role of the humanities vis-à-vis fields with blatantly

materialistic goals: education understood mainly as a way of getting ahead in the job market. A top administrator from one of those schools recently declared to *The Times Higher Education Supplement* that “it took a long time for corporate recruiters to value business ethics as a necessary skill, so we are trying to anticipate other things they will need in the future (such as well-rounded individuals with broad cultural awareness). In Europe, we have developed universities that are too specialized. We need to bring the benefits of a general education and the liberal-arts tradition” (Reisz). It is worth noting that the proposed model invoked above for elite business schools in Spain is that of the American university liberal arts experience. This example shows that there is at least a certain awareness that a twenty-first century education, in a world that is increasingly globalized and dependent upon expanding markets, would do well to incorporate humanistic studies, including literature.

A different, but especially important perspective on the specific need for literary studies is that of Ottmar Ette, a German professor of Romance literatures, who has also written on Spanish American letters. Ette argues that while “both the mass media and sponsors of research invested the biosciences with extraordinary significance” (984), it is not enough to *read* the genetic code of life, for “equally readable is the discursive code that places the biosciences at the center of a society’s attention” (984). Thus, “the risk of losing the broad cultural diversity inherent in *bios*” can be counteracted with “a culturally sound concept of life, one that is also oriented toward literature” (985). Here Ette is in agreement with Hans-Georg Gadamer’s cautionary note that “the apparatus of a civilization that is founded on science and technology does not nearly cover all aspects of living together” (cited by Ette 984).

Among the distinctive traits of a liberal arts education is the attention it pays to the analysis of difference and diversity. In a classic work, Gadamer stated that “it is not enough to observe more closely, to study a tradition more thoroughly, if there is not already a receptivity to the ‘otherness’ of the work of art or of the past. That is what, following Hegel, we emphasized as the general characteristic of *Bildung*: keeping oneself open to what is other” (17). However, one might argue that this kind of openness should probably not be expected as a principle from which to start engaging the products of difference, as Gadamer does. A balanced, smooth incursion into the vastness of otherness (which is not limited to different languages, but also includes religions, ethnicities, political views, time periods, etc.) seems advisable in light of the fact that, although difference is often the source of immediate fascination, it can just as frequently produce a great deal of anxiety. In that sense, Hispanic literatures represent a rich tradition to which many U.S. students can relate as their own as well as a very close, increasingly unavoidable “other.” This liminal space, as something at the same time

familiar and different, offers a window toward an expansion of the self that is challenging but not threatening. It is a matter not of “taming” difference but of finding a productive balance between the *theme* and the *rheme*: the given or previously known and the new information offered. The specific value of Hispanic literatures within these debates can be easily apprehended in light of the strong presence of Hispanic/Latino cultures in this country.¹ Yet current trends in academia could well diminish intellectual engagement with these cultures and limit exposure to a few semesters of language training. That would be a pity, since an education that includes the study of literature of, or by, the other might better prepare students to regard diversity not as either a blessing or a misfortune (for it engenders opportunities and richness as well as conflicts), but as a complex reality that is part of the human in society and culture.

In the texts commented in this volume, what is highlighted to a great degree is the importance of reading and interpretation as a liberating activity, or as a practice that can question the governing “narrating machines” that shape orthodoxies or socially dominant discourses (Ketchum in this volume). From the writings of Cervantes to those of Fuentes (see Gordillo in this volume), Piglia, and so many others, there emerges a case for the continued necessity of literary fiction, one that was echoed by Mario Vargas Llosa in his recent acceptance of the Nobel prize for literature: “la ficción es más que un entretenimiento, más que un ejercicio intelectual que aguza la sensibilidad y despierta el espíritu crítico. Es una necesidad imprescindible para que la civilización siga existiendo, renovándose y conservando en nosotros lo mejor de lo humano” (12) (Fiction is more than entertainment, it is more than an intellectual exercise that heightens sensitivity and awakens a critical spirit. It is an indispensable necessity for civilization to continue to exist, renewing itself and preserving in us the best of what it means to be human).

At a time of gloom and doom in academia, the good news for the humanities in general, and for literary studies in particular, is that our alumni seem to agree, to a surprising degree, that developing critical skills and learning how to learn are central to a liberal education. A recent study based on interviews of four hundred American college graduates between the ages of twenty five and thirty nine indicated that they considered “teaching students how to learn and think critically” to be the most important role of colleges and universities, ahead of other options such as “preparing students for employment” or preparing them “to solve the problems that face our country.”

Through a series of discussions of Spanish and Latin American literary texts (with some related incursions into film), the contributors to this volume address the importance of literature as a field of knowledge, while recognizing that it competes with (and complements) other media. Although

the immediate impact of a literary text on shaping a cultural imaginary may no longer be of the kind experienced with the publication of the first part (“La Ida”) of José Hernández’s *Martín Fierro* at a time in Argentine history when official ideology trumpeted the merits of Western civilization at the expense of indigenous “barbarians” (see Foster, in this volume), these essays underscore the importance of literary study within the framework of a liberal education. While it is not unusual for some of our Spanish and Portuguese or Modern Languages departments today to graduate majors who have taken few, if any, advanced literature courses, we know that when exposed to well-crafted literary texts taught in creative ways (see Friedman and Mayhew in this volume) that place students at the center of the learning process, students are likely to be similarly creative as they take possession of the texts. Edward Friedman speaks to this point as he discusses the construction of an anthology of short stories from Spain and Latin America, with the objective of demonstrating “the interplay of theory, pedagogy, and paradigm shift as they relate to the place of literature in the classroom and in society at large,” while exploring with students the issue of the multiple identities of a given text in the process of reception. Similarly, Adriana Gordillo (in this volume) demonstrates how an in-depth reading of the phantasmagoric work of Carlos Fuentes written during the last twenty years of the twentieth century—especially of those novels dealing with the cycle of “El mal del tiempo” (translated as “Mirrors of Time”)—allow for a real engagement with formal experimentation and an introduction, through fiction, to the central issues that anchor his literary and cultural criticism: among them, the search for identity, the role of the intellectual in society, the writing of history, the recuperation of historical memory, the essence of art and literature, migration, and so on. It is through literature (in this case, phantasmagoric fiction) that one hears the silenced voices of the colonial past, which reappear and acquire new meaning in the present.

Reading and interpretation are key to a liberal education, and Fuentes, the literary critic, invokes Cervantes to define his own idea of what it means to be a critical reader: “Espero ser un lector digno de Cervantes, quien después de todo fue el que inauguró el realismo al infundirle dudas a la realidad” (Hernández 57) (I hope to be a reader worthy of Cervantes, who was, after all, the one who inaugurated realism by infusing reality with doubt). To read is to doubt; it is to think critically and question orthodoxies and dogmatisms. In the end it also allows us to rediscover the human within us, our multiple identities, and the way we relate to different communities. And all while being challenged and experiencing pleasure . . . the pleasure of the text.

Notes

1. The projection of the U.S. Census Bureau is revealing: “Nearly 67 million people of Hispanic origin (who may be of any race) would be added to the nation’s population between 2000 and 2050. Their numbers are projected to grow from 35.6 million to 102.6 million, an increase of 188 percent. Their share of the nation’s population would nearly double, from 12.6 percent to 24.4 percent.”

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