

## LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Literary criticism is not what it was, both because a heterogeneous group of philosophers, anthropologists and political thinkers (Derrida, Foucault, Althusser, and Levi-Strauss) have affected its basic categories and also because the reading of texts in order to understand how they mean is now of interest to political philosophers, anthropologists, and historians as well as to literary critics. In fact, we are now seeing the emergence of cultural criticism and discourse analysis which goes far beyond the study and evaluation of a small number of canonized literary texts and which also questions the reasons why certain texts come to be evaluated as "literary." I want to begin, however, by describing how this convergence of disciplines took place and what it implies for trends and priorities for research.

Traditionally there has been a difference between the literary criticism practiced in the United States and in Latin America. The kind of close textual reading practiced in North American universities did not arouse widespread enthusiasm in Latin America except among a specialized group of scholars who studied "estilística." Instead, Latin American criticism tended to be ethical, demanding sincerity of writers and adhesion to national and liberatory goals and to the cause of the poorer classes. In the 1960s, this ethical criticism became centered on the question of the writer's responsibility. As against the chilling silence of U.S. academe that surrounded any attempt to speak of the relationship between literature and the social, the Latin American left started from the assumption that the world was in a crisis situation, on the brink of a great popular revolution; they thus demanded the immediate adhesion of writers in a manner that often implied their destruction as writers. They were urged to take up their guns and go into the hills or engage in "trabajo productivo." Meanwhile, in the United States, there was a considerable technical development in literary criticism, much of it stemming from French structuralism. Structuralism's emphasis on the "autonomy" of the literary text and its systemic character seemed to offer a technology if not a science of literature. The study of literature was thus reaffirmed as a safe occupation for literary engineers whose only wish was to tinker with the parts. In Latin America, with the triumph of military regimes, this insistence on the autonomy of the text proved a safe alternative to Marxist and sociological criticism. At the same time, much structuralist and post-structuralist criticism was plainly more insightful in considering contemporary texts than



traditional Marxist criticism. Borges, regarded as a "reactionary" writer by the left, was indeed a paradigm of literary production for many French critics. His fictions, designed to foreclose old-fashioned kinds of reading in which the reader has to draw on personal experience in order to position himself or herself according to the orientations of the poem or narrative, destroy the possibility of this kind of reading (which realist narrative encourages), and instead force a re-reading or a second reading which focuses on the tricks and traps, the illusions, of the writing and reading processes themselves. At the same time, his fictions abstract the reader from any contact with everyday life and affirm reading and writing as solitary practices, indeed as solaces made necessary by the random and purposeless character of social life. Borges's fictions thus become very powerful machines which lend credence to the structuralist/formalist claim for the "autonomy" of the literary text and its freeing of language from social determinants, whilst at the same time they resist naive ethical readings.

Yet structuralism and post-structuralism also increased the general resources of literary criticism, and hence--potentially, at least--they offered new possibilities for socio-criticism. To give a few examples: whereas literary criticism used to study tropes, figures of speech, and devices such as alliteration, to show the originality or effectiveness of someone's style, structuralist and post-structuralist criticism showed how the organization and cohesion of texts came to be constructed on a multiplicity of levels, from the phonemic to the syntactic and lexical patternings. Narrative was no longer simply considered in terms of plot, theme, character, and point of view, but in terms of narrative codes or strategies which account for the way we are lured on by enigmas, parallels, and anticipation.<sup>1</sup> Questions of order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice have become increasingly important.<sup>2</sup> Critics are also now interested in the way texts establish shared repertoires between narrators and readers, and the way in which the temporal and spatial perspectives of the utterance are established in symbolic and semantic structuring,<sup>3</sup> in the way texts constitute ideal reading positions,<sup>4</sup> and in the phenomenology of reading and interpretation<sup>5</sup> or in the way readers decode texts in different ways.<sup>6</sup>

That socio-criticism could usefully take into account textual conventions, strategies, and structures only began to be realized fairly recently. The abrupt death or disappearance of many Latin American writers who had taken to the limit their responsibility to the revolutionary cause (writers such as Rodolfo Walsh, Haroldo Conti, and Francisco Urondo) no doubt helps to account for the silencing of the most militant voices. But it had also become clear that it was not productive to apply simple ethical categories such as good, bad, or bourgeois to literature, and that identifying progressive and regressive tendencies was not simply a matter of proving revolutionary content. The 1970 polemic between the Colombian writer Oscar Collazos and Julio Cortázar on the subject of "literature in the revolution"<sup>7</sup> was the last gasp of the ethical body. In the early 1970s, Carlos Rincón in "Para una batalla de un combate por una nueva crítica en Latinoamérica"<sup>8</sup> and Cuban critic Roberto Fernández



Retamar in "Pour une théorie de la littérature latinoaméricaine"<sup>9</sup> complained of the theoretical poverty of Latin American criticism and demanded a theory that could account for the differences between Latin American and metropolitan literatures, that would be capable of dealing with complex avant-garde texts, and that would go beyond the plainly inadequate notion that literature simply reflects a social and historical situation in an unmediated fashion (a notion that avant-garde literature rendered absurd). At the same time, it was clear that structuralist and post-structuralist criticism could not simply be made over uncritically since they implied ideologies antithetical to social criticism--for instance, they fetishized the text and aligned themselves, often blindly, with the avant-garde. Thus "techniques" of analysis have to be modified before they can be deployed within social criticism.

Latin American criticism, however, needed to account for factors which "imminent" textual analysis could not recognize--for example, those qualitative shifts such as modernism or the break with realism in contemporary narrative. Not only do such movements respond to literary developments outside the continent (in metropolitan literatures), but they are also strategically deployed in response to social factors within Latin America. Dependency theory, whatever its ultimate weaknesses, initially provided a periodization which allowed critics to identify those moments when transformations in literature seemed to coincide with social and economic transformations. Hitherto, such changes had been accounted for either in terms of generations (this was inherited from Ortega y Gasset) or according to the evolutionary model which held that Latin America must pass through the same inevitable stages of cultural development (the epic, the bourgeois novel, etc.) and the same historical stages as the advanced industrial nations. Indeed, as recently as 1968, Carlos Fuentes tacitly accepts this model when he claims that Latin America's dilemma is to have arrived at the stage appropriate to the bourgeois novel which the literary world now finds anachronistic. Dependency theory allowed critics to consider Latin American culture not as condemned to anachronism, to be the tail of a comet that had already disappeared from the horizon, but to consider it as a set of strategies designed on the one hand to exorcise the overwhelming presence of metropolitan culture and on the other to assert Latin America's difference.<sup>10</sup>

The new socio-criticism which emerged in the 1970s from these various structuralisms has centered around the terms "production" and "ideology," though ultimately neither of these has proved satisfactory nor has it been easy to define them. In fact, there are almost as many definitions of production and ideology as there are critics using the terms. In Alejandro Losada's work, for instance, production seems to be linked to a functionalist view of culture; literary modes of production are shown to change in response to exogenous factors.<sup>11</sup> In Noé Jitrik's work, production is almost equivalent to style. Thus he shows how the technical mastery of Darío derives from his manipulation of rhythmic and phonemic patterns and then suggests that this technical mastery foreshadows and epitomizes the "modernity" to which certain sectors of the Latin American bourgeoisie aspired.<sup>12</sup> "Respond to" is, of course, a vague way of overcoming the awkward notion that literature reflects the social, though it has the advantage of preserving the relative autonomy of the literary text.



Exactly how the text "responds" became, in fact, the main focus of critics interested in ideology and literature (for instance, those associated with the Institute of Ideologies and Literature at the University of Minnesota). Their explorations owed more to Althusser's definition of ideology as "the imaginary representation of the subject's relationship to his or her conditions of existence," than to the view of ideology as false consciousness or error. The general assumption behind ideological criticism is that there are different textual levels--either a deep structure and a surface structure (according to Chomsky's linguistic model) or a level of unarticulated material which is displaced and condensed into a dream work (following the suggestions of Freud). Thus Joseph Sommers' study of indigenista fiction<sup>13</sup> looks at the rationalizations in the way of character and plot development which "resolve" or "manage" the contradictions of a paternalistic ideology. Hernán Vidal examines romantic novels as displacements of the rationalizations of liberal ideology into a series of structuring myths--the Adamic myth of Latin American originality, the utopian myth of a future vision of integration and prosperity, and the demonic myth of Latin American backwardness.<sup>14</sup> The implication that ideology is a kind of structuring energy has recently been developed by Angel Rama in an article on Martí which suggests a challenge and a new trend for literary study in the 1980s.<sup>15</sup> In Rama's view, ideologies cannot be reduced to distorted realities but rather are unifying forces that open up as well as foreclose possibilities. "Es posible reconocer en cualquiera de ellas [ideologies] discursos más o menos inconscientes, frecuentemente colectivos--clasistas, sexuales, culturales (lingüísticos), políticos, etc.,- así como falsas racionalizaciones que delatan los sistemas represivos sociales, pero también captaciones objetivas de la realidad y mas altos niveles de conciencia y racionalidad derivado de que tanto el autor como la lengua y el propio sistema literario son productores de sentido que funcionan dentro del marco social."

The new term here is "production of meaning," and in literary criticism we must thus start from the assumption that the poem is a symbolic event which regulates and unifies drives and discourse so that "the rationality of the poem is assumed to be aligned to an interpretation of reality." In the case of Martí, Rama is able to demonstrate the way that the heterogeneous discourses are managed by means of poetic devices such as rhyme and parallelisms. His methodology demands an exhaustive reading of all the different levels of text according to a hierarchical ordering which actualizes certain features and subordinates or thrusts others into the background.

As this language is inevitably abstract unless accompanied by practical criticism, I should like to give an example of how such a reading, in terms of the production of meaning, helps us to understand ideology. Probably the most detailed example is Josefina Ludmer's study of Cien años de soledad, which carefully details the production of meaning through parallelisms, oppositions, and semantic transformations, and establishes the conditions which have to be fulfilled to make the text understandable.<sup>16</sup> For present purposes, a rather simpler example will suffice by way of illustration--the organization of meaning in Mariano Azuela's novel, Los de abajo.



Formalist criticism has long been interested in the fact that the characters in narrative can be viewed not simply in terms of their psychological verisimilitude but as functions or roles in the dynamic of the narrative. Traditional criticism of Los de abajo tended to consider the novel as an allegory of the Mexican Revolution's triumph and failure. If, however, we consider the novel on a more abstract level as an articulated series of events and discourses which require agents, instruments, and patients, we find that there are different levels in the narrative with distinct surface actors or roles. At the beginning of the novel, Demetrio Macías is the subject of simple actions which on the level of language are constituted by indicative, transitive verbs. Luis Cervantes, on the other hand, inaugurates speech acts and discourse. He delivers speeches, names Macías a general, and articulates the aims of the revolutionaries. He also invents and fictionalizes. We can therefore establish a dichotomy which is supported by the linguistic features of the text between action and a discourse (which, because it can be abstracted from real situations, is susceptible to distortion and manipulation). In addition, we might note that characters are built up out of the accumulation of different semes or units of meaning which can then be separated into a structure of oppositions and contradictions, according to a system of semiotic constraints suggested by Greimas.<sup>17</sup> These elementary units of signification can be reduced to a number of binary oppositions--nature/culture, sincerity/corruption, spontaneous/calculating--in which the first is the unmarked term. Macías is a natural, spontaneous, and sincere character; Cervantes, calculating, corrupt, and cultured; Margarito corrupt and uncultured; with the fourth term (cultured and pure) occupied briefly by the intellectual Alberto Solís who dies in battle. As Fredric Jameson has recently suggested, such an analysis is important insofar as it can suggest some ideal or unrealized synthesis--in this case, intellectual rationality and foresight. It suggests, too, that Azuela's novel, like Guzmán's El águila y la serpiente, is structured around the absence of this ideal synthesis, and that the significance of this absent term extends beyond literature into politics. Vasconcelos's candidacy for the presidency of Mexico in 1929 was not simply fortuitous. There was a logical space within the ideology of the "gente letrada" which could only be occupied by a social actor who combined energy and intellect. What literary criticism enables us to appreciate is the fact that such a solution was based on certain structural limitations inherent in those semic oppositions between body (peasantry) versus mind (intellectual) which foreclosed other possibilities--for instance, the Gramscian possibility that the peasant might be the organic intellectual of a revolutionary struggle.

Such analytical possibilities go beyond literary criticism and signal the emergence of a new field which can be described as discourse analysis. Hayden White's Metahistory and Kenneth Burke's examination of the grammar and rhetoric of motives can, in some sense, be regarded as the precursors of this kind of study, though in Latin America the antecedents are more likely to be found in Althusser and in Foucault's identification of discourse with the exercise of power. Discourse analysis starts from the assumption that the text is not an artifact



or a book but is coextensive with the social and is "the ensemble of the phenomena in and through which social production of meaning takes place, an ensemble which constitutes society as such."<sup>18</sup> In other words, the historical and the social, if not texts, are yet available to us primarily in textual form.

Perhaps the most interesting example of discourse analysis to date is Hernan Vidal's article on "The Politics of the Body,"<sup>19</sup> which analyses the metaphors, ideologemes (Jameson's term for class fantasies), and narrative style of the discourse embodied in the Chilean junta's Declaration of Principles. Thus the junta attempts to articulate its concept of human space as if this were both "congealed in the Middle Ages" and, at the same time, organized around modern technology. It can only effect this catachresis by making the worker and the human body (the material out of which the Chilean "miracle" was effected) disappear from the discourse. This absence, as Vidal shows, helps to account for the fact that oppositional writing restores the human body to the center of its discourse, thus making manifest the ideological suppression effected in the junta's discourse.

Vidal's article is symptomatic in several ways and most importantly because it indicates that discourse analysis does not respond to some formal requirement of the discipline but rather has arisen out of the growing interest across disciplines in the way that authoritarian governments discipline and persuade populations to obey and how they use not only direct repression but the discipline of the market, of apartheid (the poblaciones), as well as what we normally recognize as ideological discourses.

The foreclosure of certain kinds of alternative is also clearly the sense of Laclau's recent article on "Populist Rupture,"<sup>20</sup> the details of which I confess to finding obscure but which attempts to establish linguistic differences between the articulation of "democratic" and "populist discourse."

What is at stake in these examples is not the obvious separation of the governors and the governed but rather how the constitution of meaning in a society involves the constitution of subjects of discourse who have the right to intervene (and the exclusion of others). The subjective is no longer the privileged domain of private life or of literary works which express the individual, but rather is social through and through since it is by constituting subjects that the structures of dominance are actively reproduced. There are rival views at the moment as to how this subjectivity is constituted, whether through primary psychological processes or within discourse itself, and it is a theme which is too complex for rapid exposition at the present time. Its central term is "positionality"--i.e., any text (in the broad meaning of that term) aligns a reader (interpreter) in a certain way (the preferred reading); in other words, it positions and constitutes an interpreting subject by its very mode of interpellation. For example, television programs constantly interpellate viewers as patriots (Wake up, America). Thus the text privileges a certain "reading," in part by inscribing "certain preferred discursive



positions from which its discourse appears 'natural,' transparently aligned to the 'real' and credible. However, this cannot be the only reading inscribed in the text, and it certainly cannot be the only reading which different readers can make of it."<sup>21</sup>

Though I have used the term "reading," I clearly have in mind something that is more dynamic than the simple reception of a pre-coded text. The constitution of meaning is always active, and it is particularly important, therefore, to bring this notion of activity to bear on a number of areas--cultures of resistance especially in everyday life, popular culture and the media, and feminist criticism--which have hitherto been dominated by passive assumptions. Thus, for instance, there have been analyses of cultural imperialism which take the view that television is a vertical medium, and that mass culture takes away the voice of the people;<sup>22</sup> and there are analyses of women in literature which are confined to the "image" of women in fiction or poetry. Let me take these areas in turn to show how they respond to a more dialectic treatment.

Cultures of resistance and everyday life. Everyday life is the very locus of subjectivity, the place where people's needs and desires are expressed, where beliefs and attitudes are reinforced or undermined. It is interesting that the first Latin American studies of everyday life as a terrain of struggle seem to have emerged in Chile, partly as a result of the abrupt reorganization of culture that took place under the authoritarian regime of Pinochet. As José Joaquín Brunner has shown, this reorganization takes place through the privatization of everyday life:

La obediencia y la utilidad máxima que son funcionales a la cultura disciplinaria se obtienen . . . por una atomización del tejido social y la interrupción de los procesos de formación de solidaridades orgánicas dentro de los grupos y colectividades. De allí debe emerger el individuo suelto de trabas tradicionales, no a la manera del ideal liberal sin embargo. . . . Se trata de un individuo heterónomo, en cambio, que debe someterse a las exigencias de subordinación en que lo coloca su posición respecto de las posiciones inmediatamente superiores dentro de un orden jerárquico.<sup>23</sup>

The study of everyday life involves the investigation of the state's control and disciplining of family, leisure-time activities, even modes of dress and behavior. Such a reorganization demands new types of culture of resistance. The "locas de mayo" and the resistance of the Chilean families of the disappeared is one interesting example of how the family can become the locus of political action as well as of social control. When we turn to more formal modes of cultural expression--novels, theater, film, and so on--we find that although censorship is now engaging the attention of some critics, less attention has been paid to a reverse phenomenon: the politicization of apparently neutral or non-political material merely because it provides a focus for feelings which cannot be channelled more explicitly. For example, the staging of "La señorita de Tacna,"



a play by Mario Vargas Llosa, in Buenos Aires in 1981 provided a non-political event of this kind. Though this can hardly be termed "resistance," it does indicate the fact that almost any unofficial public event in the highly privatized environment of Argentina or Chile becomes a latent form of dissent.

Media and literature. The development of communications during the Second World War, initiated media studies, especially around the phenomenon of "cultural imperialism"--i.e., the control of public opinion by saturating radio and television with foreign-made programs which indirectly promoted the consumer culture. The tools of analysis, at this stage, were generally those of the sociologist. The inauguration in March 1981 of the Latin American Popular Culture Association indicated that there was widespread interest not only among sociologists but also among literary critics, historians, political scientists, musicians, and artists in questions of mass and popular culture, although an adequate theory has yet to be developed. Clearly, the political importance of the media cannot be underestimated. In certain countries (especially Chile and Brazil), television has become a major instrument of social control. In other countries, the photo-novel and the comic strip are important instruments of modernization. Older theories of the media tended to regard such phenomena as merely degenerate forms of high culture and as methods of manipulating the helpless masses. Recent media studies, mostly developed outside Latin America,<sup>24</sup> have gone far beyond simple theories of manipulation which were common a decade ago. What these theories provide is a grammar and syntax of the moving image and an understanding of how images as well as language construct meaning. They also recognize the specificity of cinema, television, and radio, especially in their structuring of time. Because of Latin America's uneven development--which means that there is included within the same geographical boundaries communities without writing, and with electronic equipment and all possible varieties of print culture from the comic strip and the photo-novel to the newspaper and to the high culture forms of poetry and the novel--culture criticism must take into account not only the specifics of these different technologies of knowledge in the production of meaning but also the interaction between them. For instance, orally-transmitted narrative tends to prefer superhuman heroes, and these are perpetuated and redeployed in mass culture genres such as the comic strip or in the high culture form of magic realism. Literary realism, which depended on verisimilitude and plot closure, has been taken over by the photo-novel and the television soap opera. As Jameson has argued,<sup>25</sup> the development of certain high culture forms can be linked to new modes of perception encouraged by advanced capitalism, as well as to the need of writers and artists to distance themselves from mass culture which had gradually appropriated "realism." This suggests new ways of looking both at the media and at movements such as realism and "lo real maravilloso" which were affected by developments in other media.

In contrast to mass culture, popular culture has frequently been idealized as the authentic voice of the people. In fact, traditional orally-transmitted culture retained its importance in Latin



America precisely because of the survival of non-capitalist modes of production which were articulated into the world system through the market. It is thus more accurate to consider traditional rural-based cultures in relation to economic and social formations which were particularly resistant to capitalism. Traditional culture bonded societies and provided them with a language and a narrative for dealing with the violent process of modernization.<sup>26</sup> Yet, as in the case of high culture, what has been lacking in much popular-culture criticism is any sense of the dynamics and inter-relatedness with other modes of cultural production.

Feminist criticism. This is bound to be a priority for the 1980s, and not only because there is now a substantial body of literature by women. In fact, the predominantly male-oriented assumptions behind conceptions of authorship are a scandal that is waiting to be addressed and which still spreads alarm and despondency whenever it is publicly noticed abroad. As research in other fields is now making evident, exploration of the way texts establish gender differences often cuts across the more familiar dichotomies of civilization and barbarism or class polarities. Consider, for instance, how the heroines of nineteenth-century romanticism--María, Cecilia Valdés, La Cautiva--so often embody the impossible conjunction of racial miscegenation and romantic ideal. What is clear in the nineteenth century is that in the process of the secularization of society (in contrast to the predominantly religious hegemony of the colonial period), the system of differences between male and female is also changed. Women become allegories of "la madre patria" upon which the male project is to be realized. Even the concept of authorship is gender-specific since the author disseminates and engenders upon the receptive body of "mother" nature. Clearly this implies not that Latin American women have been less creative than men but rather that literature is constituted in such a way that women can only speak with difficulty and against the grain. The obvious example is Gabriela Mistral, who believed that she was condemned to write poetry because of her inability to do what women were supposed to do--that is, to create children. There is, nevertheless, an emergent feminist criticism both in this country and in Mexico and other parts of Latin America. Its main thrust in the 1980s will undoubtedly be towards an exploration of how gender divisions operate within the ideology of the literary texts and the construction of gender roles and identities.

To summarize, the overall trend in the 1980s is towards the development of sociocriticism. This extends our capacity to understand how literary and non-literary texts construct social meanings and how they manage heterogeneous elements and position readers by the very process of textual organization. Literary criticism expands its boundaries into the more general area of cultural criticism and discourse analysis, and hence brings a greatly increased repertoire of analytical resources to bear on new areas of research such as everyday life, cultures of resistance, and the constitution of gender differentiation. No longer qualitatively separated from the social sciences, it now participates in its own right in investigating the social.



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- <sup>15</sup>Rama, "Indagación de la ideología de la poesía," Revista Iberoamericana (julio-dic. 1980), 353-400.
- <sup>16</sup>Ludmer, Cien años de soledad: Una interpretación (Buenos Aires: Contemporáneo, 1972).
- <sup>17</sup>Fredric Jameson in The Political Unconscious defines Greimas' "elementary structure of signification" as the "representation of binary opposition or of two contraries (S and -S), along with the simple negations or contradictories of both terms (the so-called



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subcontraries -S and S-). Significant slots are constituted by the various possible combinations of these terms, most notably the "complex" term (or ideal synthesis of the two contraries) and the "neutral" term (or ideal synthesis of the two subcontraries):



<sup>18</sup>Ernesto Laclau, "Populist Rupture and Discourse," Screen Education (Spring 1980).

<sup>19</sup>In Social Text (Summer 1979).

<sup>20</sup>Op cit.

<sup>21</sup>David Morley, "Texts, Readers, Subjects," in Stuart Hall, et al., Culture, Media Language (London: Hutchinson, 1979).

<sup>22</sup>Armand Mattelart, Mass Medias, Ideologies and the Revolutionary Movement (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980).

<sup>23</sup>José Joaquín Brunner, La cultura en una sociedad autoritaria (Santiago: FLACSO, 1980).

<sup>24</sup>Raymond Williams, Television (New York: Schocken Books, 1975).

<sup>25</sup>Op cit.

<sup>26</sup>Michael Taussig, The Devil and Commodity Culture (University of North Carolina Press, 1980).