correspondents at large

Teaching Literature under the Volcano

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I HAVE BEEN TEACHING LITERATURES IN ENGLISH FOR OVER TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AT THE UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL AUTÓNOMA DE MÉXICO (UNAM), Mexico's national university, where I received my undergraduate degree. My formative years were marked, undoubtedly, by the universalist ideal that defines the motto of the university, "Por mi raza hablará el espíritu" ("The spirit will speak on behalf of my race"). I cannot recall whether I was aware of the motto's real meaning, or of its cultural and social implications, but I suppose I took for granted that what I was taught as a student was as much part of a Mexican culture as it was of a "universal" one. Reading English literature at the department of modern languages and literatures in the late 1970s meant that I was exposed to a canonical view of literature shaped as much by *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature* and by our lecturers' (primarily) aesthetic approach to it as by the idea of "universal" literature conveyed in the textbooks for elementary and secondary education in Mexico. This conviction that as a Mexican I belonged to "Western" civilization greatly diminished when in the early 1980s I traveled to London for graduate studies and was almost shattered by the attitudes I encountered while conducting my doctoral research on the image of Latin America in British fiction. I was often asked whether I had ever seen a car (let alone ridden in one), or if there was electricity in my country, and the ambivalent, mostly negative, view of Latin Americans and Mexicans in what I read (authors like Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, Graham Greene, and Aldous Huxley, as well as more than three hundred adventure novels set in the continent) forced me to question the idea that one ought to read literature merely for the enjoyment (and admiration) of it or to analyze it with assumptions that fall roughly in the category of "expressive," or "mimetic," criticism, which was common in those days and often took the form of monographic studies, which relied heavily on paraphrase.

Instead of adopting the framework of imagology, predominant at the time in comparative studies, I applied the ideas I had been

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lucky to find in Edward Said's *Orientalism* to my subject. Needless to say, Said's emphasis on the notion that European cultural representations of the Other are an imposing and complex construct (and not just mere literary or artistic "images") opened up a new and challenging horizon for my research, for understanding my place in the (literary and nonliterary) world, and, some years later, for my teaching in Mexico. Without being aware of it, I was already leaning toward an area that has catalyzed my academic development: postcolonial studies, which was not yet fully revealed as such in the field of literary and cultural studies.[1]

Back in Mexico, struggling to get a position (and, crucially, tenure) at UNAM, I had to teach some of our curriculum's core two-semester survey courses, which covered the history of English literature from medieval to modern; one semester was devoted entirely to Shakespeare and the other to literature of the United States. Any other subjects could be taught in optional courses or seminars that, in the long run, broadened our students' theoretical, critical, and literary perspective. Up to 2012, when a new curriculum was introduced, the four-year undergraduate course, taught in English, gave the students a wide picture of literature in English, as well as the basics of theory and criticism, translation, and teaching English as a second language (the three fields of professional specialization). Since 2012 the curriculum has become much more flexible and is divided into modules, part of the university's endeavor to keep pace with international developments.

I soon realized that I would not be able to teach my students the way I had been taught in the 1970s, not only because my personal experience was so different from theirs but also because UNAM's literature departments (and its other humanities, as well as social science, departments) had undergone a profound change, which was related as much to the 1994 Zapatista uprising as to the critical and theoretical turn that had such an impact in Europe and North America. Amid the triumphalist official atmosphere of the neoliberal government of President Salinas de Gortari (and precisely on the day the North American Free Trade Agreement came into force), the Zapatista revolt forced Mexicans to confront the question of the indigenous populations' place in the narrative of Mexican identity that had emerged after the 1910 Revolution and that is central to UNAM's very conception. UNAM's motto, "Por mi raza hablará el espíritu," can be seen as the twentieth-century embodiment of the long process of transculturation that, since the early 1500s, has characterized Mexico as a mestizo country. (We must not forget that our university is heir to the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico, founded in 1551, a few months after the University of San Marcos, in Peru, and some eighty years before Harvard University). For José Vasconcelos, who coined UNAM's motto, *raza* meant the mestizos of Mexico (and, to a larger extent, of the Americas), whose "race" synthesizes the spirit of humanity, the fifth race, the cosmic race.[2] However, for all its apparent inclusiveness, the concept of *raza* marginalized the actual indigenous populations of our country, because for Vasconcelos (and for government policies in general) these populations belonged to a past stage in the evolution of humanity and, thus, needed to be incorporated into an all-embracing idea of middle-class "citizenship" by means of education and the unifying official language of the country—that is, Spanish (or Castilian, as it was called at the time).[3]

One of the many issues that the Zapatista movement brought to the fore was the fact that sixty-eight native languages are spoken in the country (they have since 2003 been recognized as national languages). Paradoxically, my contact with anglophone literatures other than English and American, and the critical and theoretical debates arising from those literary expressions, helped me to interrogate

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certain (often contradictory) aspects of Mexican identity in the classroom and to make our students of English, American, and other anglophone literatures aware of our own Mexican postcoloniality, the imposition of a European language being just one of the often forgotten legacies of the Spanish conquest five centuries ago. When we begin to think about this we also begin to challenge many notions that tend to be taken for granted. Our own university responded to the issues raised by the Zapatista uprising by creating in 2004 a program called Mexico, Multicultural Nation, which in 2014 was transformed into the Program of Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Studies. A complex interdisciplinary endeavor, it immediately forced a reconsideration of the notion of literature by creating yearly festivals of poetry in indigenous languages (of Mexico, the Americas, and the world). This new awareness was also sustained nationwide by the creation of state-funded programs for the publication of literature in indigenous languages. In academic research and writing, however, indigenous-language literature is still marginal. As head of the graduate department for twelve years, I recall only one MA dissertation studying the work of a contemporary indigenous writer—the poet Itamintya, who writes in the Mixteco, or Ñuu Savi, language.

Literary studies in our university take different forms and respond as much to local concerns as to international developments. The evolution of the disciplines and the theoretical foundations that sustain them involve a rich dialogue in which several positions usually intermingle. As Mexicans and Latin Americans we do not forget that our literary background is multiple and continues to grow from the humanistic tradition that took shape in the sixteenth century and was reconfigured by the purported humanism of the Ateneo de la Juventud ("Athenaeum of Youth"), whose members defined the outlook of Mexican literary and intellectual life in twentieth-century, postrevolutionary Mexico. The cosmopolitanism advocated by authors such as Alfonso Reyes (now seen as a clear instance of the decolonizing mind-set that the critic Ignacio Sánchez Prado considers a kind of "postcolonialism *avant la lettre*") is a distinguishing trait of Latin America's cultural formation and implies that ideas circulate among a variety of networks, not just inside the Anglo-American academy, as it is sometimes suggested.

This universalist attitude, which for Sánchez Prado embodies Latin America's resistance to Eurocentrism, has allowed us, as teachers and researchers of literature(s), to work on our own terms on a number of subjects and theoretical perspectives that are studied in other regions of the world. Most of us who belong to the department of modern languages and literatures are aware that our position is more marginal than that of our colleagues in the departments of Hispanic literatures and of Latin American studies (both of which deal with our national or regional literary and cultural expressions and critical theory); however, in the past few years the dialogue among our departments has increased for several reasons. On the one hand, Latin American critical theory has responded and contributed to the international debate about the nature of the text, the relation between literature and nation, the tension between cosmopolitanism and regionalism, the function of criticism, the death of the author, questions of gender and ethnicity, popular culture, and so on by rearticulating the issues formulated by formalism, structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. On the other hand, the vulnerability of the humanities globally is also manifest in Mexican higher education, from the lack of financing to the compulsory readjustment of curricula and even to the restructuring of the departments of literature. UNAM is one of the few institutions in Latin America with departments of

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classical studies, as well as modern and Hispanic literatures. (In most of Mexico's state universities, the curriculum concentrates on Mexican or Latin American literatures, or literature is just one part of a degree in the humanities. Comparative literature is taught in a couple of private universities, but mostly in Spanish.) And, in 1998, graduate studies at UNAM underwent a major transformation. All undergraduate literary departments were subsumed under a single graduate department of literature, with six divisions: classical, Latin American, Mexican, Spanish, modern (in English, French, German, Italian, and Portuguese), and comparative. Special emphasis is placed on theory (which is now the common core) and, of course, on the study of the corresponding literature. Professors in the humanities at UNAM generally agree that for all degrees a final dissertation is a fundamental stage in students' intellectual training, and defending this step for the undergraduates and the master's students has been a major concern, because there is institutional pressure to remove it from the syllabus, to promote graduation. Apart from these extraliterary factors, the idea of literature and the literary has become rather unstable, ranging from a canonical, traditional concept to a wide variety of paradigms that increasingly question the nature of our undertakings (and that can be roughly related to a growing, but not always well-sustained, interest in cultural studies; to losing sight of the "literary" when popular forms are studied; and to an acritical overreliance on the Web). As things stand now, as our country faces a difficult sociopolitical situation (reflected in tragic events such as the disappearance of the forty-three Ayotzinapa students in 2014), our role as lecturers, tutors, and researchers is to help our students regard their theoretical and literary interests critically—that is, in relation to their own national identity and reality.

Notes

1. Ironically, years after I discovered how dismissively Latin America was viewed in British culture and literature, I was told in Mexico that my Spanish translation of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* could not be published in a series called Our Classics because an African novel could not be considered a "classic." This attitude seems to prevail in Mexican bookshops, where it is difficult to find Spanish translations of works—other than bestsellers—by anglophone and francophone African or Caribbean authors.

2. In his famous 1925 essay *La raza cósmica* ("The Cosmic Race"), Vasconcelos proclaimed that, because of its complex process of *mestizaje* (miscegenation), the population of Iberian America embodied all the races of the world. The subcontinent's people constituted, thus, a fifth race—also called a "bronze race" or "cosmic race"—that would lead to the creation of a new, more spiritual civilization. For Vasconcelos, the term *raza* included a medley of features associated with concepts such as "culture," "customs," "language," "civilization," and "people" and therefore had strong ideological connotations that implied an opposition to Anglo-Saxon influence.

3. Although Vasconcelos's role as a politician and intellectual is now broadly questioned, especially because of his turn to the right, his messianic vision of an educated Mexico deeply influenced our sense of identity. His goal was to publish and widely distribute a series of one hundred "fundamental" books, which included the classics, Eastern mythology, and authors who were popular at the time, such as Rabindranath Tagore, Romain Rolland, and George Bernard Shaw.

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