

# THE USES OF LITERARY HISTORY

## Some Recent Titles

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*THE ROUTES OF MODERNITY: SPANISH AMERICAN POETRY FROM THE EARLY EIGHTEENTH TO THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY.* By Andrew Bush. (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press; London; Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2002. Pp. 423. \$69.50 cloth.)

*EARLY SPANISH AMERICAN NARRATIVE.* By Naomi Lindstrom. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004. Pp. 231. \$45.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.)

*THE DIALECTICS OF EXILE: NATION, TIME, LANGUAGE, AND SPACE IN HISPANIC LITERATURES.* By Sophia A. McClennen. (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2004. Pp. 300. \$32.95, paper.)

*LATIN AMERICAN FICTION: A SHORT INTRODUCTION.* By Philip Swanson. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub. 2005. Pp. 141. \$68.95 cloth, \$26.95 paper.)

*THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY SPANISH AMERICAN NOVEL.* By Raymond Leslie Williams. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. Pp. 249. \$22.95, paper.)

In recent years, traditional literary history has often been cast as a hold-over from a previous age, and as an object of scrutiny because it reinforces the aesthetics, codes, and mores of the dominant class. Its very reason for being, assert its critics, is the preservation of cultural capital at the hands of the privileged few, as John Guillory (1993) has argued powerfully in *Cultural Capital*. Quite in contrast, a now mostly forgotten but in its time influential article published by *PMLA* more than fifty years ago offered a disciplinary breakdown of "what we do." (Stevenson 1952). Nearly ten of the thirty-seven pages of this professional position paper are devoted to literary history, the rest mostly to linguistics and textual editing, and only seven pages are on "literary criticism" and its "limitations." Clearly the percentages have reversed since that confident statement.

Just a few years ago, Stephen Greenblatt, the soon-to-be president of the MLA, ruminated, in another highly visible *PMLA* essay (2001),

about the current place and function of literary history within the profession. Greenblatt made his name as one of the founding members of new historicism, the Anglo-American critical movement that inherited the mantle of the French Annalists and infused it with Birmingham-school dialectical materialism, a Foucauldian eye for networks of "social energies," and for a desire to incorporate the (mostly silent) voices of the masses. As Greenblatt famously wrote at the beginning of a key book, he "began with a desire to speak with the dead" (1988, 1).

New historicism marked a pendulum swing towards context and away from the text, the predominant mode during the previous twenty or thirty years. Up until then, the text had either been deeply decipherable to the point of being an isolatable aesthetic object, as the new critics and the structuralists had insisted, or it was deeply undecipherable, as post-structuralists like Derrida, for whom meaning is eternally postponed, claimed. But on the whole, the main attention had been on the *text* (and its effects), often at the expense of social and historical considerations, with notable exceptions like Lucien Goldmann and Foucault.

While new historicism retained many of the close-reading methods of its French and new critical predecessors, it marked a shift away from the study of form, linguistic strategies, and questions of textual ontology and self-reference. Instead, it shifted towards social, political, and contextual concerns. In many ways this meant a return to an older, sociological approach to literature, while at the same time using the tools of structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction. Within new historicism, in the works of critics like Greenblatt and Steven Montrose, extratextual cultural productions like court documents, popular and oral culture, sociological data, ritual, religious belief, and even physical evidence, were "textualized," and could be read as another kind of intertext, and part of a legible mega-object that could fit seamlessly along with traditional historical sources but also Shakespeare, Molière, and Cervantes. In important ways new historicism and its flagship journal *Representations* energized the profession by opening the canon, and by inviting outside methods from the social sciences and other disciplines. The terminologies of anthropology, history, and sociology became familiar to academic students of literature. New historicism's hybrid methodology also prefigured the subsequent "culture wars" of the late 1980s and opened many paths for cultural studies. Greenblatt had dared to propose a broader and more inclusive textuality that he dubbed a "poetics of culture."

It was only natural that, just as Greenblatt was about to become the president of the authoritative (and normative) institution of the profession, he issued a highly visible declaration reevaluating one of its cornerstones, traditional literary history (2001). Many of Greenblatt's objections are well taken. One of the most valid revolves around the potentially dangerous relationship between the idealization of aesthetic monuments and

nationalism. Greenblatt complicates this relationship by exploring the intriguing racial underpinnings of national pride: cultural monuments, canons, and the histories that uphold them can lead to unwavering aesthetic normativity where certain forms of expression and ethics are held up as exemplary, to the exclusion of others. This sort of normativity, notes Greenblatt, can create the cultural and ideological foundations for genocide.

Certainly canons, like any cultural production used to reinforce a sense of group identity, can become the tools of chauvinism, can result in blindness, and may ultimately lead to injustice or even atrocity. Yet it is difficult to avoid the human urge to create history, and Greenblatt is clear on that. It is a matter of changing what history upholds and whose tale it tells, he argues. True to his new historicist roots, Greenblatt does not propose abandoning literary history altogether. Instead, he champions its radical reeducation from within. He proposes to divorce literary history from the necessary evil of a linear chronology, for he suggests that such chronologies give literary history the false authority of a sacred text as well as of an inescapable hierarchy through “periodization”: realism begat modernism which begat postmodernism, and so on, and this kind of hierarchization can be cast as analogous to the “birthright” of the dominant classes.

Greenblatt argues that English departments are now mostly beyond this kind of hierarchization, and that the literary history they now promote is post-national and multi-cultural. Literary history still includes Shakespeare, he writes, but it also now includes Salman Rushdie, and Wole Soyinka and Toni Morrison. “It is not that Shakespeare is being overlooked,” he writes, “but rather that some of the most significant novels, plays, and poems are being written in Delhi and Lagos, Atlanta and Antigua” (53). This sort of renovated literary history, according to Greenblatt, avoids the developmental models of old-style history and its implicit hierarchies. Most importantly, Greenblatt suggests that this new, neutral canon offers a way of defusing national pride, by allowing “the aleatory, accidental, contingent, random dimension of literary creativity,” and avoids “any organic account of the nation” (60).

How does all of this pertain to Latin Americanists? As an example of the “bad, old” literary history still being practiced in the objectionable and triumphal way, he offers the recent *Cambridge History of Latin American Literature*, edited by Roberto González Echevarría and Enrique Pupo-Walker. Greenblatt charges the editors with effecting a “pragmatic, strategic appropriation of the national model of literary history—with its teleological, developmental narrative of progress—in order to confer authority on an emergent group” (54).<sup>1</sup>

1. In 1991, Greenblatt published *Marvelous Possessions*, a book on the impact of the New World on the Early Modern European imagination. Roberto González Echevarría (one of the editors of the *Cambridge History* that Greenblatt would later bring to task in this article)

Whatever disciplinary or intellectual battles may be playing out in this critique of Latin Americanists, the debate over the shape and uses of traditional literary history has real practical dimensions for those professing Latin American studies within North American academia. While the dangers of cultural blindness are always present in any sort of canon-building, there is an enormous mitigating circumstance for Latin Americanists: Latin Americanists, at least in the United States, are not hegemonic. This is because of the fact that, no matter how large undergraduate enrollments in Spanish-language courses might be, and however well the job market for new Spanish PhDs might stand, the teaching of and research on Latin American literature is still an exotic bird in this country. The history and culture Spanish departments put forward to their students are not the common currency in North America. In an article on the place of Spanish in cultural studies, George Mariscal notes that until recently departments of comparative literature did not accept Spanish as a language of study. "Writings in Spanish did not emit the same kind of cultural sheen that French, German and even certain periods of Italian literature exuded for the academy in the United States" (59).

Despite the many methodological, ethical, and archival affinities between Spanish departments and English, American studies, and cultural studies departments, Latin American studies has a separate place and function in North American academia. The coverage expected from an average Spanish department, say, at a large state university in the United States, typically includes not just the languages, but the culture and history of twenty Latin American nations including Brazil, as well as that of Spain, the U.S. Latino population, and Portugal. This area of coverage includes roughly half a billion people. Spanish departments are supposed to handle all the periods from medieval times to the present, all the established literary genres including film, and cultural studies besides. This is not to mention, especially at the larger institutions, linguistics and pedagogy. Such an ambitious spectrum within a single department is almost unheard of in English, American studies or ethnic studies departments in this country, not to mention in Latin America itself.

Greenblatt's idealistic and modest proposal, his intention to swerve away from the national and more towards a critical, post-national stance in the direction of "mobility studies," where "world culture" is "in fact our home, our *nostos*, from which we have long wandered and it is time to return to it" is commendable (59). But it is impracticable for Spanish

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wrote a critical review of it in the *New York Times* (April 1992). González Echevarría holds it against Greenblatt that he chose to examine several Colonial Latin American texts while possessing very little knowledge of either Spanish (the very title of Greenblatt's book comes from a mistranslation from Columbus's *Diarios*, he points out), or the long Latin American tradition that has already examined and reexamined these same texts and arrived at some of the same conclusions that Greenblatt offers as new.

departments doing what Spanish departments are expected to do. His proposed model for renovating literary history could only exist because of groundwork already laid down by an invested sense of cultural agglomeration: the Anglo American literary tradition, and to a lesser but still important degree the French, German, and Italian traditions, all hold a place in the national memory and culture of the United States in ways that Latin America, and even Spain, simply do not, not to mention U.S. Latino literature.

The task of many of us in the field consists of establishing not just the “what” of Latin American literature and culture, but also the “why,” in other words, the validity of studying it. Given the current cultural landscape, one of the basic obligations of our field is introductory, something not always the case with other national literature and culture departments. This, for better or for worse, calls for a canon, or at least a body of anthologizeable works. As Philip Swanson, the author of one of the books under consideration here, writes in his introduction, “critical accounts based on a discourse of marginality and exceptions, while often a valuable corrective, sometimes ignore the realities of literary history and the validity and importance of a coherent explanation of trends and patterns that do come to prominence and form part of what must ultimately be seen as a mainstream” (2). “Old” literary history still has a place, and an ethical pedagogical function, within Latin American studies in the United States. The publication of three recent literary histories, of exactly the type to which Greenblatt objects, by three of the most able practitioners of the genre, stand witness to this continuing need.

The first, by Naomi Lindstrom, *Spanish American Narrative* is the most sweeping of the three, since it covers a space of four centuries, from Discovery to *modernismo* (a space that is commonly anthologized in single volumes and that is also commonly taught in single-course undergraduate surveys). Lindstrom’s fine book follows her much-consulted *Twentieth Century Spanish American Fiction* (1994). Lindstrom’s purpose is clear and her way of achieving it is equally so: she aims to reinforce formal continuities that may or may not be there by limiting her scope to the study of narrative. One of this book’s strengths comes when it addresses one of the most recurrent, and sticky, questions concerning colonial texts. Many of the central works that have been folded into the canon are legal documents, dispatches, official records, memoirs, revisionist histories, and political pamphlets, instead of being strictly literary or creative. Especially in departments still organized around a traditional study of literary form and periods, the question often arises in the classroom as to why these works are considered “literature.” While Lindstrom does not directly attempt to answer this question in a definitive way (a task that is virtually impossible), she does an admirable job of working with it: her purpose is to guide a reader in *how* to read these texts. For instance,

in her treatment of Christopher Columbus's logs, she gives just enough historical context to make them comprehensible to a beginner, but also seamlessly blends insights from recent criticism and from current theoretical preoccupations like feminism and post-coloniality to help frame a contemporary and resonant reading. By neither offering a defense of eclectic inclusionism on the one hand, nor openly favoring nationalistic canon-building on the other, she negotiates the gap between these two positions by stressing the interesting formal and contextual features of a given work. This is an honest, informative, and well-crafted book, and will guide students at many levels, from the advanced undergraduate to the graduate and professional levels.

The second, by Philip Swanson, is more confined than Lindstrom's, since it limits itself to the late-nineteenth and twentieth century. But it is equally useful for the lay reader interested in deepening his or her knowledge of "what's out there." It is best put to use by a reader with little or no knowledge of Spanish who wants to read these books in translation, since the books of most of the writers discussed are readily available in English. The material and assessments offered are accurate and informative but too basic for the specialized student. Rather, this book is meant for an educated reader with some awareness of world culture but little of Latin America; it takes for granted, without much explanation, for instance, concepts like existentialism (in relationship to Latin American new narrative) but explains in quite some detail Hispanic modernismo, which would be less familiar than Euro-American modernism, as well as other "Latin American" concepts like magical realism and indigenism.

Swanson, author of previous and quite useful books on García Márquez and the Latin American literary boom, necessarily relies in this work on well-known literary historical periods, with chapters each on the nineteenth century, regionalism, the new narrative, the boom and the post-boom, Hispanic literature, and the "culture wars." An interesting feature about this book is that, in addition to offering a picture of chronological progress (as most literary histories do), it also presents a spatial view. Swanson writes, for instance, that José Lezama Lima's *Paradiso* . . . can probably best be situated as adjacent to rather than part of the Boom" (93). His categories—the boom, the post-boom, etc.—are presented as logically interlocking building blocks, or parts of an elegant map, rather than simply progressive sequences, an approach that would doubtless please Greenblatt in his wish for a nonhierarchical method of categorization (although, of course, one could argue the hierarchies are always implied: Swanson himself freely admits, as stated above, that he is aiming to establish the "mainstream" [2]). Swanson's book is written in an unusually conversational tone, and is quite easy to read. Its intended audience of nonspecialists allows it certain latitude to be

refreshingly opinionated (“while Fuentes is a towering intellectual presence, it is doubtful that he can be considered a great novelist” [66]).

The third book is by Raymond L. Williams, a prominent scholar and author of standard monographic works on Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Carlos Fuentes, as well as literary histories on Latin American postmodernism and on the Colombian novel. *Twentieth Century Latin American Fiction* sets out to chronicle the “complete” century. As Williams states in his introduction, his study is different from previous literary histories of the twentieth century in that it has the benefit of assessing it in its entirety, now that it is over. The book divides the century into five distinct periods with a one or two chapter section on each. The first chapter in each of these sections names the major novels and novelists of the period in question, and briefly traces common cultural and intellectual threads—with sections on topics like science and developmentalism, modernismo, and so forth—and offers some historical and intellectual context as well. The subsequent chapters in each section are devoted to a closer treatment of a few representative novels.

The book boasts more scholarly apparatus than Swanson’s; the footnotes and the discussion of the texts display a finely gleaned cross-section of the major criticism. This academic obeisance never interferes with the solid introductory nature of the book, as it weaves these secondary sources into a clearheaded, panoramic exposition of the novelistic output from Latin America. A commendable aspect of both Swann’s and Williams’ books is that they both expand the conventional limits of Latin America by including works from U.S. Hispanic authors written both in English and Spanish.

Of course the main obstacle in any attempt to build either a comprehensive catalogue or a representative sample lies in what to include and what to leave out. Williams’s book, for instance, explicitly reaches out to lesser-known writers, yet it would be impossible to account for every lesser-known writer in a one-volume work such as his. For instance, in Williams’s discussion of the novels of the Mexican Revolution, the writer Nellie Campobello, who has recently received a fair amount of critical attention, is not mentioned. Why include Antonia Palacios and Yolanda Oreamuno but not the Argentinean Beatriz Guido? The questions, and the lists, could go on forever. Lindstrom addresses this issue (in a way that probably speaks for all three books) by explaining that although in her case she gives more space to women writers than is the norm, her main goal is to avoid the “‘telephone book’ approach to literary history: ‘I have not tried to cram into these pages the many names of women writers who have recently been rediscovered, preferring to focus on a representative few’” (4). What these three scholars choose to omit does not limit what they do present, which is a preselected representative sample and a succinctly framed context to flesh it out.

A very different fourth book of recent appearance is worth considering in light of my discussion of literary history. This is Andrew Bush's *The Routes of Modernity*. It complements well some recent scholarship on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but especially Doris Sommer's groundbreaking *Foundational Fictions* (1991) and Carlos Alonso's *The Burden of Modernity* (1998). Like these previous books, Bush's offers a rereading of canonical texts with a broader reconsideration in mind: it tries to explain a broader force—namely, commerce—that shaped the culture of the period in question.

Like these other books, Bush's incorporates close readings, a deep understanding of historical context, and larger theoretical concerns but especially trauma theory and Benjaminian notions of descent, quite effortlessly. One of its most striking successes is that it effectively *generates* what to me appears an entirely new literary history; it collects what might look like, at first blush, a very uneven body of primary works and authors, ranging from Andrés Bello to "noncanonical" texts, largely unread today and missing from the major anthologies covering the period. Bush freely acknowledges early on that many of his subjects are "minor" writers but he manages nonetheless to weave them all together into a corpus that simply did not exist before: its object of study is so confidently handled that it makes this gathering of texts feel well established. The various texts and writers are presented as a well-formed body with a real solidity, and this book in effect creates a believable archive *ex nihilo*. It makes one wonder why the reader hadn't heard of some of these writers before. This is the work of a "strong" reader, in the Bloomian sense: in many cases the reading is stronger than the texts themselves.

Bush's book, like Sommer's, finds a set of rich metaphors and then explores their parallel implications for both the formation of national identity and the development of a literary aesthetics. Its recurrent themes—melancholia as a process of retrospective awareness, the distinction between internal and external commerce (both literary and literal), and the idea of dialogue versus monologue in relationship to national constitution (especially as articulated between Bello and Heredia)—are most remarkable.

However theoretically rich this book is, it is worth stressing that it is still firmly anchored in literary history. But it does do something quite unusual, perhaps the more so than any of the books we are considering here: this book relies on its strong conceptual framework in order to present some novel recastings of canonical figures and works: for instance, it baroquely claims that José Martí, in his appropriation of José María Heredia, effected a sort of "Belloization." There are some compelling close readings of individual texts as well, as when Bush plays with the homology between "Herida" and the name Heredia; when he offers the image of Esteban Echevarría as a kind of merchant sailing home from



Europe but failing to sell the European “goods” of Romanticism; and his informed discussion of the oriental locus of Bello in the context of the progress piece. There is much to learn from in this book.

A fifth and final book to consider is Sophia McClennen’s fine *Dialectics of Exile*, which, like Bush’s *Routes*, is not meant to be a comprehensive overview but rather a reconsideration of a particular period along thematic lines. McClennen’s book limits itself to three case studies, analyzing the works and lives of the Chilean Ariel Dorfman, the Uruguayan Cristina Peri Rossi, and the Spaniard Juan Goytisolo (the inclusion of Goytisolo places this book under the rubric of transatlantic studies, a growing academic niche in recent years). The conceptual ground for uniting these three quite dissimilar writers is a solid one: each is an exiled intellectual whose life and works is a direct response to authoritarian governments. This last is something Latin America and Spain have unfortunately shared in recent memory, and as a result, much critical, biographical and historical attention has been paid to exile and its obvious impact to the cultural production of both Latin America and Spain. However, this book stands out in the ways it deepens the meanings and dynamics of exile.

This book offers a theoretically aware argument that draws from established concepts from theories of national identity, postnationalism, and postmodernism, as well as from linguistics, feminism, and Marxism. What is unusual about it is that it does not deal with exile as a negative, traumatic event that is in effect all aftermath, as is commonly the case. Instead, it casts exile as a positive and ongoing mode of evolving cultural identity. McClennen presents exile as the initiation of an ongoing “dialectic,” a word rich with Marxist, linguistic, and aesthetic resonances, all of which she mines successfully. The cultural production of exile, she rightly notes, needs to be read as a series of “dialectical tensions,” rather than as static, binary oppositions where one end of the binary is favored in the interpretation (28).

This book engages with fundamental questions head on: what is the difference between an exile and an immigrant? What is the concept of “homeland”? How is the process of representation, never a simple one, complicated by displacement? “The crisis of language” of the exile, writes McClennen, “while revealing a crisis in the subject, does not lead to the end of representation” (119). Rather, the literature of exile “often revolves around the exile’s sense of loss,” or the “exile’s sense of freedom once the bonds of the nation are loosened. The exile often attempts to rewrite national history and also often attempts to rewrite [. . .] notions of community that are not predicated on the nation” (222).

This book fits in nicely with some remarkable books from recent years on the post-dictatorial condition, like David Hertzberger’s *Narrating the Past* (1995), which studies the effects of the Franco regime in Spain, or Idelber Avelar’s *The Untimely Present* (1993), which is on the task of

mourning in post-dictatorship South America. McClenner's insightful ruminations on the dynamics of exile are well-taken and their implications wide-ranging, leaving the reader wishing that the case studies could extend beyond the three authors considered.

In conclusion, the canon is a necessary fiction, not an immutable and monolithic object, and the literary histories that chronicle it are likewise only stable to a point. We can witness this in the differences between the world visions presented by each of these five books: they do not propose identical corpuses, by any means, despite many overlaps and similarities. But what they do share is the need for the literary canon itself as a stable tool, as a useful but implied scaffolding. This does not mean that these books are unquestioning in their belief of literary history, or unwilling to alter it in some fashion. Some, like Williams's and Lindstrom's, expand literary history generously by opening room for previously underrepresented works and trends—U.S. Latino literature, women writers, minor writers. Likewise, McClenner expands it by introducing exile as a legible cultural product, as legible as any text. Swanson's work presents the Latin American canon to outsiders in easily digestible portions. Finally, Bush's *Routes of Modernity* actually reshapes it entirely by using what was already there.

Stephen Greenblatt's fears regarding the persistence of traditional literary history need to be allayed: "what I have called the national model of literary history[. . . ] is not at all disappearing; rather it has migrated from the center to what was once the periphery," to disciplines like Latin American and Third World Studies (53). To claim that Latin American Studies "was once the periphery" is off the mark. It is still much in the periphery, at least within North American academia and in the American cultural landscape in general. As such, Latin American Studies still requires a unifying, and teachable, fiction to organize and introduce its materials.

Of course, omissions, injustices and silences will occur whenever any sort of list-making and cultural gatekeeping are employed. But Greenblatt's worry that traditional literary history does not include "the aleatory, accidental, contingent, random dimension of literary creativity," is hardly the case of Latin American studies (60). No matter how triumphal, organic, and developmental is the narrative Latin Americanist literary historians try to construct, historical reality is sure to undermine it. Anyone who tries to use literary history as a narrative of "cultural legitimacy" for Latin America will always run into the messy, violent, and inescapable realities along with this narrative. As I have argued elsewhere, the history of Latin America is one of triumphs punctuated by defeats, and as such its major cultural monuments are conflicted—witness the figure of Miguel Hidalgo, the Mexican "founding father" who was beheaded, all the defeated revolutions, the megalomaniac dictators

who ruined their countries, the centuries of abuse of indigenous populations, and all the foreign interventions. But this history, and cultural monuments, are certainly fascinating. Ultimately, Greenblatt might be correct and literary history might prove to be an outmoded tool; but until the exigencies of researching and teaching from the periphery change, literary history will remain a useful, imperfect, craft.

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