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Latin American and Comparative Literature

Roberto González Echevarría
Yale University

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Roberto González Echevarría,
"Latin American and Comparative Literature"
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Abstract: In his paper, "Latin American and Comparative Literature," Roberto González Echevarría asks whether comparative literature, a literary discipline dedicated to the proposition that linguistic boundaries must be transcended, can overcome the "cultural arrogance" of the "Eurocentrism" that he believes pervades it currently. González Echevarría argues that if it is to endure, comparative literature will have to undergo "a truly pitiless redefinition," one that effectively displaces "the hegemonic powers of nineteenth-century Europe" and that Latin American literature, by the nature of its historical development on the margins of these "hegemonic" texts and traditions, could -- and should -- play a central role in this rehabilitation. González Echevarría's paper includes a discussion of how Carpentier's *The Lost Steps* can serve as an example of how Latin American literature reads the canon and how reading those readings can lead to new insights into both canonical works and those presently excluded. González Echevarría argues that Carpentier's text, for example, ought to be considered required reading for both Latin Americanists and students of comparative literature -- especially those seeking to make Spanish and Portuguese their primary languages -- and he makes a clear and convincing case for using the literatures of Brazil and Spanish America as the mechanisms by which comparative literature can be both redefined and revitalized.

Roberto GONZÁLEZ ECHEVARRÍA

Latin American and Comparative Literatures

One has to wonder, in the wake of the radical critical revision of the past twenty years, and more important, the international recognition of writers from parts of the world not generally included in the curriculum, if comparative literature as a discipline has survived. Has there been a realignment of literary history parallel to the one in the international arena that calls for a fresh critical approach to the discipline, for a remapping, as it were? The debates sparked by the assault on the canon dramatize the urgency of such questions. Work on colonialism and literature is giving currency in literary studies -- properly translated -- to the linguistic dictum that a language is a dialect with an army. Many would now say that a literature is a body of texts with an army and an Alliance Française. It would probably be a shock to the founders of comparative literature, who acted to combat the scourge of nationalism, that the field is now seen as the reflection of only a slightly more encompassing kind of cultural arrogance: Eurocentrism. Even at its most liberal, when conceived as a study of literature transcending linguistic barriers, comparative literature compared literature to itself, meaning that it compared authors, works, and movements within the confines of the hegemonic powers of nineteenth-century Europe. This seems intolerable today and at odds with what should be the thrust of the discipline: to compare literature more broadly to texts not commonly considered literary, as well as to others coming from outside the confines of what were the imperial powers of the last century. In the current climate, there seems to be little future for comparative literature, unless a truly pitiless redefinition can be negotiated.

But what has occurred so far has merely been a prelude (one hopes), with very few real changes having taken place. In what follows I shall give my assessment of the situation, consider the place of Latin American literature in a new, redefined comparative literature, and close with a reading of a scene of Alejo Carpentier's The Lost Steps that may help in understanding how I think Latin American texts read the canon and how they can be "comparative." I will be expressing, for the most part, opinions based on personal experience rather than finely tuned and supported arguments.

Has the questioning of the canon really changed things, and has "theory" truly ventured beyond the canonical works? I am afraid not or, at least, not yet and not enough. The situation is, in terms of everyday experience, bewildering. On the one hand, Hispanists and colleagues in disciplines other than comparative literature, English, German, or French usually know, in addition to their language and literature of specialization, at least French and English, if not both, and they are conversant with the literatures of the hegemonic languages. But colleagues who specialize in those languages or in comparative literature rarely know ours. We know our literatures as well as our Proust, Dickens, or Schiller, but they have only the vaguest of notions, if any, about Lope de Vega, let alone Andrés Bello or Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. A Latin American intellectual would choose a slow, painful death over being caught short on his Mallarmé, and I have yet to meet one who did not know French. But I have never met a French intellectual or professor who knew Spanish. We, the "colonized," are cultural polyglots; they are generally conversant only with English, French, or German. We "know more," yet have to constantly justify our membership in the field of comparative literature. They can go around saying Valejo (as in "Valley Joe") for Vallejo, Borgés (as in "Boar Jess") for Borges, and Marqués (as in "Mar Case") for Márquez, but one would be loath to say Rimbaud (as in "tout"), Proust (as in "oust"), or Goethe (as in "pithy"). It would be foolish, of course, to fill ourselves with pride for our cosmopolitanism. They do not know our literatures for the very same reasons that we know theirs. Theirs are important, canonical, the core of the core curriculum; ours are marginal, exotic, frilly, not part of anyone's cultural literacy program.

Lest anyone be deluded, that core curriculum now being defended fang and claw by the far right is not a list of books handed down in a stone tablet on Mount Rushmore. It is the product of the nineteenth-century European imagination or, if you please, nineteenth-century European ideology. It is not the Greeks and Romans that we ought to read and revere but the Greeks and Romans as read, interpreted, and promoted in France, England, and Germany during the last century. The same applies to Shakespeare and the rest of the "great books" tradition. Yet I doubt that

anyone is seriously challenging the value of Shakespeare, Dante, or Goethe. It is really the more recent canon that the struggle is about, the unstable edges where new membership is still being issued. Really, is it more important to produce one more study of Stendhal showing how he subtly got around contemporary definitions of sexual roles, which were constructed, needless to say, according to a Foucauldian model? Is yet another book on Sade, Bataille, Freud, and Lacan needed more than one on Jorge Luis Borges and the modern tradition? Do we have to read yet one more confession from a tedious academic who thinks the tribulations of his pathetic postmodern and presumably postcolonial ego are interesting? I do not think that anyone whose voice is worth hearing is seriously promoting abandoning oneself to a mindless relativism, with no value judgments allowed. On the contrary, I believe that the issue is that many writers from areas not represented in the canon are better than those routinely included in the canon. Should comparative literature invest in Smollet or in Sarmiento? Can comparative literature be seriously concerned with the relations between Latin American and French poets, rather than continue its obsessive study of US and French poets? When will the Mallarmé-Stevens French connection ever give way to the Baudelaire-Neruda Latin one?

One should not be fooled into thinking that recent critical theory, even when allied to seemingly radical political agendas, has really strayed from the canon. It is very symptomatic that until La Conquête de l'Amérique, Tzvetan Todorov had devoted himself exclusively to the most French of the French, and the same applies to Julia Kristeva, whose Théorie du roman exhumes an obscure medieval French text, whereas the Spanish ones that would have been much more relevant to her arguments are relegated to a footnote. Has Kristeva ever heard of Libro de buen amor or Celestina? Kristeva's quaint and quiet révolutions of poetic language are tempests in the French teapot, easily absorbed by the Alliance Française because they never stray from the sacred texts. Where is Latin American literature in Jonathan Culler's reflective Structuralist Poetics? The same is true, alas, of Fredric Jameson and Edward Said, who have built their theories, for the most part, oblivious of Spanish. Said's Orientalism barely recognizes, again in a footnote, the existence of an earlier, much different form of Orientalism, in a Spain where Arabs were the dominant force for eight centuries (for a correction, from the field of Hispanic studies, see Kushigian). And only recently, and with what appears to be a very hastily acquired familiarity with the region and its texts, has Jameson finally begun to read Latin American literature as a projection of his political fixations. The field of Latin American criticism is so colonized and so terrorized by the fear of being politically unfashionable that a host of followers of Said and Jameson spring up immediately, willing to trail along, overlooking as minor flows their comprehensive ignorance of our culture. Said can go so far as to write things like "Central and Latin America", which on the pages of a State Department communiqué would cause wrath as well as mirth, yet feel that he has the authority to criticize Borges and Mario Vargas Llosa. (215). Unless some geological upheaval, inevitably unleashed by California, has disconnected Central America from the rest of Latin America, Central America is and has always been part of Latin America. Another case in point is Jameson's introduction to the recent translation of Roberto Fernández Retamar's "Calibán." Jameson and his editors seem to ignore the fact that the essay is an answer to "Ariel," arguably the most important essay ever written in Latin America, published by José Enrique Rodó in 1900. It seems to me that boldness of this kind, which I am sure my truly admired friends Ed and Fred would not dare display when dealing with the French or the English, reveals an overseer mentality that is much more that of the colonizer than of the would-be decolonizer.

On the home front (that is, among Latin Americanists) there has not been a dearth of distortions, even when motivated by the best political interests. The effort in recent years to align Latin American literature with that of the so-called Third World has been a fiasco, unless it is understood simply as part of a political agenda with no basis in history. If by Third World it is meant countries that emerged from the debacle of modern empires in non-European regions of the globe, then Latin America, which was the creation of a much older and different colonialism, has to be a different cultural entity, with a different kind of literature. I am surprised and distressed by self-proclaimed Marxist critics who abandon all notion of the specificity of history to equate all imperialisms, and the cultural products of all colonial encounters, no matter when or where they took place. The bur-

den of Latin American culture is a Western culture that reaches back to the Middle Ages, when the foundations of the Spanish Empire in the New World were set. Ours was from the beginning a culture of ostentatious viceregal capitals, surpassing in splendor cities of the Old World, often because they had to compete with magnificent urban centers constructed by the Aztecs, Mayas, or Incas. This urban quality of Latin American culture also obeyed Spanish Neo-Scholasticism, grounded on the Aristotelian notion that civilization was, as the etymology indicates, something proper to cities. Latin American colonial culture, in many ways medieval, is so distant from that of the United States that gross distortions and misreadings are bound to occur unless substantial study of it is required in the curriculum. For the time being, it seems as if the fate of Latin American literature in the American academy is to become the object of what Rolena Adorno calls "pop lit-crit."

[The latest fad among a clique of Latinamericanists has been to return to the old romantic yearning to read the West from outside the West, thereby aiming to redress all the injustices of colonialism. Either naive or in bad faith, these "critics," who call themselves post-colonialists but are thoroughly colonized materially (nearly all work in US or British universities) and intellectually (they draw their ideas from Western thinkers), claim to work in favor of the marginalized by rejecting the aesthetic. Some are willing to dispense with Borges, Carpentier, Pablo Neruda, Gabriel García Márquez and Julio Cortázar and replace them with, one supposes, their own theorizing or the texts they rescue from oral traditions or popular culture. This fad will wind up, with "dependency theory," "theology of liberation" and "subaltern studies", in the junkyard of ideological fantasies, while the authors mentioned continue to be read and cherished. Having just returned from the Bogotá Book Fair -- April 2002 -- I can attest to the vigor and enthusiasm of young Latin American writers and their success with the public. Post-colonialists are not interested in literature, luckily for literature.]

The question of the new is so poignant in Latin American literature because ours is such an old culture, back through our European roots and through those of the native and African cultures. The entire history of Macondo has been written in advance, in Sanskrit, by a wizard; it is a story that emerges from the very origins of history and writing. In those origins writing precedes history. The literatures of the Third World are recent; some have come into being in the twentieth century. Latin American writers find predecessors, within what they consider their own literature, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Octavio Paz's passionate and polemic literary biography of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is a case in point. There were Renaissance-style literary academies in Lima at the turn of the sixteenth to the seventeenth century, and hundreds of Petrarchan poets in seventeenth-century Mexico. If anyone should doubt this, he or she ought to read Alicia de Colombí-Monguió's Petrarquismo peruano and Irving Leonard's Books of the Brave and Baroque Times in Old Mexico.

A parallel, politically motivated effort that has, to my mind, met with failure is that of pretending that Latin American literature and culture are oral. The proliferation of "testimonial narratives," in which an informer "speaks" in the first person, is part and parcel of this movement. But Latin American culture is truly a culture of the letter, as Ángel Rama saw clearly in La ciudad letrada. There was a university in Hispaniola in the sixteenth century (called Saint Thomas Aquinas). A college at Tlatlelolco, near Mexico City, taught Latin to upper-class natives. Besides, the historical significance of the Discovery and Conquest of America was very much due to the invention of movable type. Only because of the disseminating power of the printing press did the Discovery have the impact it had on European history and thought. And only because of its ability to communicate through print was the Spanish Empire able to become a viable polity, through the issuance of the myriad laws that make up what is known as the Derecho Indiano [Laws of the Indies]. Both the New World and its inhabitants gain legitimacy through writing, and polemical, literary, and historical writing proliferated in the New World. It was and is like a fine, resilient net from which it is very difficult to escape (see my Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative).

I would be the last to pretend that this primacy of the letter has not been accompanied by violence. "La letra con sangre entra" [Writing is taught by drawing blood], says the Spanish proverb,

and there is no shortage of revolting examples attesting to its validity in Latin American history. But cruelty to the Other has also been perpetrated by oral cultures, if such a thing exists. More important, the preponderance of the written does not necessarily mean submission but a struggle from within that lies at the core of Latin America's most enduring works, like those of Borges, García Márquez, and Neruda. The oral does not bring about liberation. Latin American dictators -- think for a moment what dictator means -- have often been masters of oratory. Their dictates have been bravely contradicted by the written word -- from graffiti to books -- which does not require a physical presence that could lead to incarceration, torture, and death. Many Latin American liberators, from Simón Bolívar and José Martí to Che Guevara, have been writers, sometimes compulsive grafómanos.

Traces of the endurance of this culture of the letter are clearly discernible in Borges and García Márquez. Testimonial narrative could not be more revealing in this respect, but not in the way ideologues would wish (including some of their authors). By turning into writing the informant's account, the "lettered" observer enmeshes him or her into the world of writing. Rather than reinforcing the oral nature of Latin American literature, testimonial narratives reveal the very opposite to be true: that we are a culture of the letter. As Carlos Fuentes has written, "The Roman legalistic tradition is one of the strongest components in Latin American culture: from Cortés to Zapata, we only believe in what is written down and codified" (34). The resiliency of the old depends on this centrality of the letter, which I would be inclined to believe is not so crucial in so-called literatures of the Third World.

Because of its chronological depth, reading Ernst Robert Curtius and Erich Auerbach is as necessary to approach Latin American literature as it may be to study French or Italian literature. There is, for instance, a strain of classicism that reaches back to colonial Lima and wends its way to the present through nineteenth-century Colombia and modern Mexico. García Márquez has often said that among his favorite readings as a young writer were the Greek tragedies, and Carpentier used to repeat that there was, for him, no better novel than the Odyssey. This is indeed quite visible in Chronicle of a Death Foretold, whose plot is that of a tragedy, and The Lost Steps, which is, among many other things, a rewriting of the Odyssey (a book one of the characters carries in this journey through the jungle). José Lezama Lima knew patristic literature so well that he named his influential magazine Orígenes after Origen, and one need not belabor the debt of his major novel to medieval literature when its title is Paradiso. To overlook the solidity of Latin American literature's bond to the European tradition -- not just the modern -- is, as we say in Spanish, like trying to obscure the sun with one's finger.

The founders of Latin American literature as a self-conscious social and creative activity, a movement that coincided more or less with the process of independence from Spain, began their work in the early nineteenth century. They were diplomats, politicians, revolutionaries, from various regions of Latin America, who met for the most part in Paris and began to create a modern, continental literary awareness, a common sense of purpose, and cultural solidarity. This feeling of belonging to a linguistic and literary family was expressed not only by manifestos but by the editing of anthologies, like the famous América poética, published in 1846 by the Argentine José María Gutiérrez in Valparaíso, Chile, which included poets from all over the Spanish-speaking world. There were also books of criticism, literary gossip, manifestos, critical editions, prologues, which began to furnish Latin American literature with the kind of metatextual density modern literatures all but require. All of this happened much before the beginning of the twentieth century, and this explains why Latin American writers since then have considered Paris a kind of literary capital, a center that Mexico City, Havana, or Santiago could not always be, for geographical as well as political reasons. It also explains the depth of the French and European culture in general of contemporary writers like Carpentier and Cortázar, both eloquent defenders of the Third World but very different from writers nurtured in those regions, for whom the international arena could be foreign, menacing, and new.

The equation is simple. Literature as we know it and practice it is a Western concept and pursuit. If we posit that Latin America has a literature, then it has to be a part of Western literature, even if some writers deny it, because denying literature or the West is one of the components of

the modern literature of the West. I repeat: once we proclaim the existence of a distinct textual field called Latin American Literature, we must accept that its being part of literature makes it inevitably part of the West, even and perhaps mostly when it pretends not to be so. Being Western, however, does not mean being like French, English, or even US literature. What is, after all, that which makes Latin American literature distinct and apt to be compared? And how, in the final analysis, does it fit within that embattled and perhaps nonexistent field of comparative literature?

Paz has complained that, though modern, Latin American literature is missing a critical corpus to accompany its "creative" texts. This is true, but only to some extent, and has the deleterious effect of giving writers like Paz himself an authority as critics that smacks of collusion. This may be more harmful than the absence of criticism. But such an absence, if it indeed exists, is more than compensated for by the critical element that is so much a part of all major Latin American texts. What I mean by critical here may very well result from a lack of self-assurance, from a nagging question about its own legitimacy that leads to a searing self-questioning, a self-questioning that unsettles all elements of a text, from its linguistic foundations, to tradition, culture, and the very history of Latin America as a framing and supporting discourse. In this I follow Paz in another essay, in which he claims that Latin American literature is "a literature of foundations"(2-8). There are no certainties and no givens in a novelistic world such as Macondo's, where even the most ordinary things lack names and the very history of Latin America has to be retold, along with the novel, as if scaffolding and building, frame and picture, needed each other to exist as such. It is not coincidental that the major critical revision of the past twenty years in the West -- structuralism and poststructuralism -- has been accompanied, not by a similar process in Latin America, but by the emergence of literary texts by the likes of Borges, Lezama Lima, Carpentier, García Márquez, Fuentes, Augusto Roa Bastos, and Severo Sarduy. A case could be made that the same kind of critical activity is at work in those texts, some of which inspired critics like Foucault and Barthes. In Latin America, again, literature itself became the issue, but from within literature, not from the work of critics. At the height of the structuralist and postructuralist controversies, French literature hardly felt the need to question itself, and when it did, in Sollers, for instance, hardly anyone paid any attention. Not so in Latin America, where such probing seems to be the spark that sets off the production of texts. Latin America's sense of belatedness may very well be what hones it into the cutting edge of literary production today.

If there is a difference between Latin American literature and that of the canonical West, it is one of degree, not of kind. And that degree of difference results from that foundational quality discovered by Paz. I would add that what this element brings to Latin American literature is an ability to be concerned in a rather impudent way with what I would call cosmic issues. The literature of the West, even the most modern or postmodern, is one in which major questions must be assumed to have been solved or are too cumbersome to present without embarrassment. Only in the most ironic or indirect way would a French, English, or North American novelist deal with themes such as the very foundation of history and culture of those societies. It is as if a French poet could write an epic about a certain battle at Roncesvalles and have a hero named Roland tell us a story of defeat and gallantry. Or as if an English novelist set out to rewrite Beowulf (Macanaíma, a modern Brazilian novel, has more in common with Beowulf than anything that I have read in English). The central constitutive idealization of Latin American fiction is that Latin American discourse emerged with the most significant historical break in the West since the birth of Christ: the Discovery and Conquest of America. This is why Carpentier can make Columbus and Queen Isabella, engaged in a sizzling love affair, the protagonists of one of his last novels, The Harp and the Shadow, and García Márquez can dare make Bolívar the protagonist of his General in His Labyrinth. Could George Washington or Thomas Jefferson play a similar role in a US novel? In poetry, both Neruda and Paz have written in the epic mode in Canto general and Sunstone. In his poem, Paz, reaching back to Aztec mythology, is even more cosmic than Neruda. His poem links up with Aztec calendric and cosmological obsessions. Both Canto general and Sunstone, as well as several novels by Carpentier and Fuentes, are cast in a dizzying numerological mold that reaches back to Dante and a medieval conception of the organic nature of the cosmos. I don't find this in other modern

literatures, except in James Joyce, whose relationship to the canon may very well be akin to that of Latin American writers.

There is a certain naïveté in this stance as well as an homage to the romantic origins of all modern literature. Carpentier was open in his debt to Blake and maintained that all modern Latin American literature was essentially romantic. It was his view that the task of Latin American writers was to name things for the first time, like Blake's Adam and like Columbus. This foundational element, this burning proximity to the origins of the modern tradition, is what distinguishes Latin American literature, what makes it different and hence capable of being compared with other literatures of the West. The question is how Latin American literature reads that tradition, how it incorporates it and incorporates itself within it.

One can safely say that the major conundrum in defining Latin American literature has been precisely how it deals with tradition, by which I mean received texts. Borges's idea is that it should be without superstition or reverence, and his disciple and biographer, Emir Rodríguez Monegal, claimed after reading Mikhail Bakhtin that all Latin American literature is parodic in essence. Borges writes in Discusión (Buenos Aires, 1957), 161: "Creo que los argentinos, los sudamericanos en general, estamos en una situation análoga [a los escritores judíos dentro de la tradición occidental]; podemos manejar todos los temas europeos, manejarlos sin supersticiones, con una irreverencia que puede tener, y ya tiene, consecuencias afortunadas" [I think Argentines, Latin Americans in general, find ourselves in a situation analogous [to that of Jewish writers within Western tradition]; we can address all European topics, address them free of superstition, with an irreverence that can have -- indeed, already has -- fortunate consequences]. Belatedness and the anxiety of influence are overcome by means of an aggressive rewriting of the canon. I cannot accept Rodríguez Monegal's proposal completely because it condemns Latin American literature to a congenital secondariness and because parody tends to produce only minor works, with exceptions. Besides, one is hard put to read Neruda's Canto general as a parody of anything, and there is nothing carnivalesque in Borges himself. Moreover, how does the belatedness of Latin American texts differ from that of any other modern text and from the way tradition is wrought in the West?

Borges's idea seems more productive if we see it in relation to the Latin American obsession with historical beginnings and ends. In a sense what Borges claims is that Latin American literature is comparative literature, because dealing with the Western canon without superstition or reverence means to ignore the hierarchies and the chronological imperatives, not to take into account what is supposed to be most important or what came first. It means to read as if all of literature had already been written and were available to the Latin American writer in a kind of apocalyptic textual whirlwind where he or she could pick and choose at will. Latin American works often pretend that they are written at the end of history and contain all previous literature. These are what I call archival fictions, like Terra Nostra or The War of the End of the World, written precisely in an apocalyptic mode. Our anxiety about the beginning, about our beginning, leads us to posit (or to posture) that we are at the end, or better, that we are the end, the pregnant end of some new beginning that explodes out of the totality of history -- a beginning as telling as the Discovery and Conquest of America. I realize that, taken to its ultimate consequences, this is not radically different from the stance of any modern text in the West, but as part of the cosmic disposition of Latin American literature discussed before, it is a founding fable different from any other one finds among contemporary literatures.

A redefined comparative literature could begin to use the reflections of European literatures in the "marginal" literatures as a way of remapping the field and rewriting the canon. In these literatures a more severe and rigorous test to the presuppositions of canonical texts may emerge than what obtains from the reflected self-analysis of much theory and speculation. The issue would then be one not of comparison but of rewritings. Such a process might lead back to literature rather than to criticism, and it is not a sure thing that it will yield a cogent theory or even a methodology in the way that we are accustomed. It will be more a guerrilla assault than a sustained siege in the grand manner. Perhaps what these marginal literatures teach us, after all, is the contingency of theory, its inapplicability beyond the self-enclosed textual subfield from which it emerges. Novels by Fuentes can be used to read Henry James and those by Lezama Lima to read Joyce. Again, the

question will not be how these works agree but how they differ, how the reading and rewriting practiced from the margins mobilized elements in the hegemonic texts that were previously inert, beyond the reach of criticism and theory. This is criticism by fiction and friction. But to do this a new class of readers trained (not improvised) in the marginal literatures will have to appear. These critics and scholars will not read "peripheral literatures" always from the center, but will be capable of reading them also in their own context, with all of the philological care this demands. This is not an easy task when dealing with "untranslatable" works like those by Lezama Lima, but one worth attempting in founding a new comparative literature.

I would like to close by reading a passage of The Lost Steps, which may serve as an example of how Latin American literature reads the canon and how reading those readings can lead to new insights into both canonical works and those presently excluded. On their first night in the Latin American capital, Mouche and the narrator-protagonist of The Lost Steps go to the opera, "a falta de espectáculos de más color local" [for lack of more popular entertainment], as the latter apologizes (111, 43. Los pasos perdidos appeared originally in 1953 and The Lost Steps in 1956). They are playing Donizetti's Lucia di Lammermoor in a quaint theater adorned by busts of Donizetti himself, Meyerbeer, Rossini, and Herold. The whole atmosphere, according to the jaded and rather unpleasant narrator-protagonist, is romantic, filled with things "rescatadas de otro siglo" (111) [survivals from the past century, 43]. The protagonist anticipates being put off by the ridiculous scene, but he is taken in by the powerful emotional appeal of the spectacle on and off the stage: "Pensaba divertirme con los ridículos de la ópera que iba a representarse dentro de las grandes tradiciones de la bravura, la coloratura, la fioritura" (111) [I had hoped to be amused by the extravaganzas of the opera presented in the grand manner of bravura, coloratura, fioritura, 44]. "Me sentía dominado más bien por un indefinible encanto, hecho de recuerdos imprecisos y de muy remotas y fragmentadas añoranzas" (111-12) [On the contrary, I felt myself yielding to an indefinable charm, a fabric of vague, remote memories and partly remembered longings, 44]. The protagonist's anticipated critical distance is replaced by an act of recall that pierces through what one might expect to be the many books he has read to a personal experience, allowing him to identify emotionally with his surroundings. The scene reminds him of a day in which he, alone in the house as a child, found a diary written by his great-grandmother: "Una tarde que estaba solo en la casa, yo había descubierto en el fondo de un baúl el libro cubierto de marfil y cerradura de plata donde la dama del retrato hubiera llevado su diario de novia. En una página, bajo pétalos de rosa que el tiempo había vuelto de color tabaco, encontré la maravillada descripción de una Gemma di Vergy cantada en un teatro de La Habana, que en todo debía corresponder a lo que contemplaba esta noche" (112) / "One afternoon when I had been alone in the house I had discovered in the bottom of a trunk an ivory-bound book with a silver clasp in which the lady of the portrait had kept her diary. On one page, under rose petals that time had turned the color of tobacco, I found the ecstatic description of Gemma di Vergy sung in a theater in Havana that must have been the counterpart of the one I was seeing tonight" (44).

Things that "survived from the past century" are elevated by the displacement of the self involved in this process of remembrance, this "recherche du temps perdu." Much could be gleaned from the transformation of those rose petals into tobacco-colored leaves, but suffice it to say (if I may) that the patina of time has invested them with an intoxicating quality that suspends the protagonist's incipient disbelief and allows him to come closer to his surroundings. The protagonist's reveries are cut short by Mouche, who insists on leaving the theater, bothered by the provincialism of the entire place. In her complaints she reveals the subtext of this suggestive scene: "Llegado el intermedio, Mouche se había declarado incapaz de soportar más, pues aquello -- decía -- era algo así como 'la Lucia vista por Madame Bovary en Rouen.' Aunque la observación no carecía de alguna justeza, me sentí irritado" (113) [At intermission time Mouche flatly stated that she could not take any more of it, for according to her, it might have been "Lucia as seen by Mme Bovary in Rouen." Although there was something to what she said, I felt suddenly irritated, 45]. The narrator-protagonist's grudging recognition of Mouche's insight is one in a series of comments that show his increasing dissatisfaction with her (and indirectly with himself). She has come to represent a kind of mechanical agent of cultural translation that he wishes to exorcise. To Mouche, everything

"aboutit au livre," whereas he fervently wishes to leap out of the book. Her obsession with finding literary and cultural allusions stands for an oppressive form of anteriority, a saturating tradition, a core of Western knowledge out of which it is impossible to find a way out. Of course, the book she discovers beneath the scene they are "living" could not be more appropriate or significant. Madame Bovary is, precisely, a text in which the saturation of life by literature is pushed to the extreme.

In Madame Bovary the scene recalled by Mouche is a savage attack on Romanticism as well as a rigorous critique of representation as the projection of the image of an inner world of feeling. The clash in Flaubert is between the biting satire of the narrator and the identification of Emma with what she sees on stage. She is transported by the "lamentations mélodieuses" [the melodious lamentations] to the point where her own voice blends in with the music on the stage: "Emma jeta un cri aigu, qui se confondit avec la vibration des derniers accords" (224) [Emma gave a sharp cry that mingled with the vibrations of the last chords, 162]. She is smitten by the figure of Lagardy, in the leading role, whose splendid life of adventure she tries to imagine. Like Don Quixote at Maese Pedro's puppet play -- the subtext of Flaubert's own scene -- Emma is oblivious to the distinction between fiction and reality. Her whole emotional life is projected onto the stage. To the narrator, on the other hand, Lagardy had an "admirable nature de charlatan, où il y avait du coiffeur et du toréador" (224) [an admirable charlatan type, in which there was something of the hairdresser as well as the bullfighter, 161]. Lucia di Lammermoor has obviously been chosen because of its extremely melodramatic plot and the exaggerated displays of coloratura demanded of Lucia and Edgar, the "râles élégiaques d'une douceur infinie" (224) [the elegiac gurglings of infinite sweetness, 162], as the narrator describes their singing in mock-heroic terms. Emma, unlike Carpentier's narrator-protagonist, allows herself no critical distance, whereas Flaubert's narrator widens the gap between the character's feelings and the meaning of the language.

Emma's identification, however, is provoked not simply by the music but also by the plot, which she knew from having read Walter Scott's Bride of Lammermoor, on which the libretto is based. The theme of the bride who kills the husband to whom she has been married against her will and who then goes insane is close enough to her own situation to strike a chord within her. Charles, who is the Sancho Panza of the scene, is unaware of all this. He cannot follow the story because the music distorts the words. But Emma's memory of the book allows her to pierce through the music to the violence of the situation. She is not simply overwhelmed by the music. She is also drawn by the story, by the text. The story is alluring in a most personal and perverse fashion, a powerful invitation to murder, no less. It is Lucia's madness, therefore, that Emma focuses upon, because it is the model of her own, which is to live literature, to live representation; it is to live, in other words, beside herself in the other who is the mirror-image of her desires. In her madness Lucia imagines that she is being married to Edgar, that the fairy tale she desires is actualized. This is the most famous scene of the opera, a "holiday of coloratura," as a critic has called it (cover notes, Highlights from Donizetti's "Lucia di Lammermoor" (London Records, 1976)). What are the florid decorations of coloratura if not a nonsignifying utterance, a deviation from the linguistic and even musical code that suspends meaning, that does violence to it? It is the language of madness. Emma's fascination with the spectacle of Lucia is more significant than even the narrator suspects in his smug satire of romantic expression. The projection of feeling is mediated, in Emma's case, by the passion for literature that also afflicts Flaubert, by that text that her memory brings forth through the nondiscursive part of the spectacle. This passion is akin to Lucia's coloratura, a language of madness, of pure representation, that dwarfs the ironies of the narrator. The richness of this scene is to be found, precisely, in the resilience of Emma before the assault of the narrator.

Carpentier's scene takes up this dialectic. Mouche's reading of Flaubert is apparently superficial, but it indicts her as a Bovarist herself. She has really opened a textual Pandora's Box. She can only see the ridiculous and outdated elements of the scene around her, appearing to side with Flaubert's narrator. But by reacting with such alacrity, she is clearly allowing herself to be ruled by Flaubert's fiction. Yet Mouche is the agent that shatters the narrator-protagonist's delusion, his journey back through memory to his great-grandmother's diary, now fatally mediated by Flaubert's work. Carpentier's reading emerges from this confrontation, and it strikes in both directions:

toward himself and toward Madame Bovary. It is only proper, perhaps, that a female figure be the one to call the attention of the narrator-protagonist to the fact of his own Bovarism. Mouche, the object of scorn, is nevertheless the critical element. She is on Flaubert's side.

We must not disregard the other female figure evoked in the scene: the great-grandmother who wrote the diary. While rewriting Flaubert, Carpentier has feminized his literary lineage, recognizing perhaps the strength of Flaubert's character, her strength before the onslaught of the narrator. But the female lineage could also be a strategy on Carpentier's part to neutralize the European tradition, one that is curiously bound to fail because Flaubert himself is, after all, the one who made his strongest character a woman. Neutralization at that level entails a different kind of Bovarism: confusing the character with her creator. It is clear, in any case, that both the narrator-protagonist and Carpentier are hopelessly entangled in writing and in the book. Reaching back to that personal, pristine moment of childhood inscribed in memory leads to a book, with very solid ivory covers and a firm silver clasp, to a memory that is as enmeshed in literature and literary tradition as the subtext that Mouche has uncovered.

Flaubert, on the other hand, is indicted for having created an inverted kind of Bovarism, one in which emulation of his narrator leads to a persistent refusal to give in to representation, while yielding to it by the very process of imitating his stance. Flaubertism is also a form of Bovarism, one from which Carpentier seems incapable of escaping. The reach of the literary is thus widened; its capaciousness now also includes irony and doubt. Mouche's Pandora's Box is the mise en abîme of all modern perceptions of literature, one that is as voracious as the Quixotic quest to live representation. The scene in The Lost Steps reads, it seems to me, this double bind. Mouche is, in the last analysis, Flaubert. No less. True, Carpentier has not escaped tradition, but his text has tested the limits of tradition by reading it from one of its confines.

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Author's Profile: Roberto González Echevarría teaches Hispanic and comparative literatures at Yale University where he is also chairman of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese. One of the early editors of Diacritics and The Yale Journal of Criticism, González Echevarría is the author of many books on Spanish and Latin American literatures. His Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative (1990) won awards from the Modern Language Association of America and The Latin American Studies Association. His The Pride of Havana: A

History of Cuban Baseball (1999), which also won an award, is González Echevarría's contribution to cultural studies. In the Spring of 2002, González Echevarría delivered the De Vane Lectures at Yale on the topic of his next book: Love and the Law in Cervantes. He is the recipient of several honorary degrees, the most recent a doctor in letters honoris causa from Columbia University in May of 2002.