

## A Historical Account of Difference: A Comparative History of the Literary Cultures of Latin America

Mario J. Valdés  
*University of Toronto*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

### Recommended Citation

Valdés, Mario J. "A Historical Account of Difference: A Comparative History of the Literary Cultures of Latin America." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 4.2 (2002): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1159>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 1346 times as of 11/07/19. Note: the download counts of the journal's material are since Issue 9.1 (March 2007), since the journal's format in pdf (instead of in html 1999-2007).

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**CLCWeb Volume 4 Issue 2 (June 2002) Article 12**

**Mario J. Valdés,**

**"A Historical Account of Difference: A Comparative History of  
the Literary Cultures of Latin America"**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss2/12>>

---

**Contents of CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 4.2 (2002)  
Thematic Issue Comparative Cultural Studies and Latin America**

**Edited by Sophia A. McClennen and Earl E. Fitz**

<<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss2/>>>

---

**Abstract:** In his article "A Historical Account of Difference: A Comparative History of the Literary Cultures of Latin America," Mario J. Valdés addresses the well-recognized limitations of literary history as historical research. Valdés outlines the theoretical thinking that has guided the editors of *The Oxford Comparative History of Latin American Literary Cultures* to plan, organize, and complete the first history of literary culture of Latin America. The project is comparative, recognizing the radical diversity of the continent while at the same time it is an open-ended history that informs but does not attempt to provide a totalizing account of more than five hundred years of cultural development among the heterogeneous entities that make up Latin America. Valdés begins by considering the paradox of literary history, he then suggests ways that literary history can be shaped by the work of Michel Foucault, and he proposes a framework for a hermeneutics of literary history. Valdés also considers the challenges that face the literary historian whose work now includes cultural history. All of these considerations are then placed within the context of an effort to create a literary and cultural history of Latin America.

**Mario J. VALDÉS**

**A Historical Account of Difference: A Comparative History of the Literary Cultures of Latin America**

**The Paradox of Literary History**

In his influential essay "Literary History as Challenge," (1982) Hans Robert Jauss makes the following argument: "The task of literary history is ... only completed when literary production is not only represented synchronically and diachronically in the succession of its systems, but also seen as 'special history' in its own unique relationship to 'general history'" (39). My response to Jauss's third point -- regarding literary history's own unique relationship to general history -- will constitute the major part of this paper and in so doing I will outline my basic argument for a post-Foucault history of literary culture. In order to take up Jauss's challenge we must first establish the social basis for literature and, consequently, literary history. A community in the sense of the Greek polis cannot be made by a housing development or a city planner nor by a religious leader of a utopian settlement. A community, like a language, grows out of human interaction and an open public life that will eventually encourage group identity. The foundation of community life is dialogue, the willingness of persons to talk and to listen to each other, the expression of mutual concerns, a debate on differences of opinion. Above all, it depends upon a sense of belonging and therefore having a vested interest in the life of the community. The question that immediately arises is: How do we situate communities in a literary history without reducing the diversity and unique features that distinguish them? The answer -- in any case, my answer -- was to enlist the participation of social scientists: cultural geographers, linguists, demographers, social historians and anthropologists to map the foundations of the rich diversity of Latin American literary cultures (see the website of the project at <<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/lithist/latin.html>>). This mapping constitutes the first section of volume one of our Comparative History of Latin American Literary Cultures (see volume one at <<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/lithist/1engdetail.html>>).

Some of the key questions that pertain to the viability of a community are covered by the issue of who has a right to speak. Throughout history there have always been some persons who live in the community but who are excluded from the debate. They have been prevented from participating for many reasons including religion, caste, race and gender. The sense of belonging to the community, which is so central to its development, paradoxically has also been the basis for excluding those who are different from those who set the rules. Persons in authority in communities around the world and in all periods of history, including our own, have established rules of eligibility or citizenship, which regulate rights and privilege and which also attempt to control communal dialogue, but to no avail. There is no law that can get people to talk to each other with mutual respect when they do not already have it, nor is there any law that for long has been successful in silencing those who would speak in spite of being excluded. There is a political dilemma here. In ideal terms universal freedom to speak is a desirable goal, but governments cannot legislate mutual respect when there is inherited distrust of those who are different. Or, to put the dilemma in terms of Hegel's political philosophy, is it possible to have a community wherein everyday practice does justice to both particularity and universality? Northern Ireland has given us a prime example of the dilemma. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has come up with the most lucid response to Hegel's paradox in his *Philosophical Arguments* (1995): "What seems to be emerging ... is a hazy picture of history in which our understanding will be embedded. It rejects altogether the Hegelian single line of development, but it retains something like the notion of potentiality.... It does point us to a future of humanity in which the kind of undistorted understanding of the other aimed at by the comparativist enterprise will be increasingly valuable ... We can hope to advance in this direction, to the extent that the community of comparativists will increasingly include representatives of different cultures, will in effect start from different home languages" (164).

We live in a time of distrust in all aspects of life. Just as Cuba has lost its revolutionary self-confidence, so has the United States lost its self-certainty of empire. Foucault's recognition of the lust for power in all social organizations has become a fact of life at the end of the twentieth century. There is one universal truth today: a loss of faith in the human capacity to respect differences.

If we turn to Jauss's thesis that literary history must be related to general history, we must deal with this central issue in historical terms -- the inclusions and exclusions which literary history has itself practiced throughout its existence. General history does not select the participants and the events that have been designated significant within the tradition although individual historians may choose to revise the estimations of some. It is only in literary history that the process of selection is either openly ideologically determined or, in most cases, uses the notion of aesthetic quality and formal achievement to disguise what is ultimately inclusion on the basis of ethnic political conservatism. Is this not the crux of the matter? If literary history is to be given the same reception as general history, the process of exclusion must be examined closely.

### **Literary History After Foucault**

Our response to this challenge was to establish two groups who examined literary histories in Latin America. One group addressed the exclusions on the basis of socioeconomic, racial and ethnic factors and while another focused on perceptions of gender and sexual orientation (see Vol. I, Section 2 at <<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/lithist/1engdetail.html>>). In *The Order of Things* (1994) Foucault argues that between the codes of perception and the reflexive knowledge by which we organize reality there is a middle region of the experience of order itself (355-66). I interpret Foucault's designation of experience as our quotidian practices of living in the Polis which revolve around agreement and disagreement, concord and conflict. We have words like 'argument' that cover all disputes, but others, like 'dialogue' and 'debate', are specific social practices of presenting if not resolving differences. Other words, like 'contradiction,' 'contrary,' and 'contradistinction' are more individual designations of difference, either attributed to the other person or to the arguments presented by the other. In all these words and their semantic derivations we are dealing with differences, with struggle, opposition, and tension, with or without resolution.

Let me review what I have taken from Foucault before going on to my hermeneutics. The codes through which we function in our social life should not be confused with rules of comportment or laws of civil regulation. These codes of perception and engagement govern the way we relate to each other within the community ranging from everyday greetings to sexual relations. These codes constitute the ways through which we explain our action, our intentions and ourselves. These codes are embedded in our language use and in the social status implicit in language use. These codes put into practice the multiple preformed values of our social group. At the other end of the spectrum there emerge the various paradigms of order; these are the logical, rational means society and, especially, history have developed in the last four hundred years to control diversity. All forms of historical writing are paradigms of the creation of order out of diversity and, by the same generalizing token, all literature (in its basic function of mimesis) makes manifest the diversity of human perception; therefore, literary history is an attempt to organize the self-representation of life writers have given us. And in between the codes and the sense of order lies the irreducible reality of difference. In summary, writers start from within the shared codes of the community, but they are also under the constraints of modes of organization operative in the community, be they modes of religious, political or class distinctions. The tension between the writers' experience in the observance of life under social codes and the modes of order subscribed to by the cultural authorities leads to rebellion, opposition at all levels and, ideologically, contradiction. This dynamic view of literary culture is not easily described in a historical narrative. Our proposal for a hermeneutic approach to literary history begins by taking the historical perspective of difference as the problem to be addressed.

A few additional remarks are necessary on what I have been calling the social codes through which we live in communities. First, it must be recognized that these codes all relate to interpersonal behavior that has been given or assigned meaning. Second, the transmission of these codes is accomplished by literature, cinema, television and, today, by electronic communication. Actions expressing both love and esteem are the most frequent in the behavioral repertoire of interpersonal relations (since we must recognize that the well-being of the individual takes precedence over goods and services) and they are also the primary topics of literature. But love that is unrequited and esteem that turns into envy are always implied. Amongst the multiple social symbolic codes that operate in our communities we can designate four general categories that encompass

multiple codes expressed consistently and, primarily, through literature. They are: 1) all forms of love including self-esteem, regard for the other(s) and love of community which becomes a form of primary identification, as in nationalism, and the negation of any or all of these; 2) status which includes standing in the community and related issues of ethnicity, class and gender and the underlying manifestation of authority; 3) questioning or the need to know, a category that includes education and self-learning as well as the drive for control over information; and 4) participation in exchange systems, which includes all forms of work and services provided and received in exchange for value. These codes have both a history of concrete realization and of symbolic expression; the former is the domain of anthropology; the latter is that of literature. Among the modes of order aimed at controlling the writers' use of social codes are all forms of direct and indirect censorship and, of course, school curricula (with the legitimizing status it gives) as well as the various forms of canonical domination. What interests us here is finding a model of literary history that will explain the tensional relation between the codes of symbolic action within a society and the organizing modes of order which always and without exception select and, also, exclude and marginalize those elements of the symbolic codes that do not subscribe to the ideological pre-formation of culture they support.

The relationship between the codes and the organizational modes of order is best characterized as a struggle that can be as destructive as it can be constructive of a literary culture. There are only two basic issues: what are the modes of order that have been imposed on the symbolic discourse of the community in question and how is it possible to avoid the necessary distortion of the exercise of power gained by the control of knowledge or, better yet, the knowledge-construct. Implicit in this inquiry is the question of responsibility. In his final works before his death in 1984 Michel Foucault revealed what, to most of his readers, even some of his most careful readers, was a consistent yet hidden line of thought on ethical responsibility. A retrospective reading of his major works brings to light an overriding will to unmask the very activity of philosophy in terms of moral responsibility. He was not interested in a code of conduct for philosophic writers and, much less, in setting up ethical models of conduct. But with increasing intensity, he questioned the ethical responsibility of intellectual inquiry itself. In this sense his ethical concern was shared by his contemporaries, Levinas and Ricoeur. The question of the ethical consequences for intellectual inquiry is never far away from the opening pages of Foucault's later works. But what, perhaps, distinguishes Foucault among his contemporaries was his oblique approach to the issues of responsibility. For example, instead of addressing the problem of how and by whom knowledge is constituted, he asked what does it do? Knowledge in functional terms becomes that which one group has that gives them an advantage over those who do not possess it. Or, to give another example, instead of examining how the holders of power represent reality, Foucault moves ever so slightly to an oblique angle and asks us to look at what power constructs and purports to be reality. In terms of the history of philosophy he leaves behind the epistemological inquiry that had dominated Western philosophy since Kant and suggests that human institutions and the means of how we know the world are invented by the center of power in any social group. His concern was with the use of knowledge and the strategies to take advantage of information as power. If knowledge is reconfigured as power and power is a means of domination then the disclosure of these power relationships becomes an ethical necessity. Foucault realized that there was never to be an escape from the configuration of the knowledge-power relationship and thus, like a modern-day Don Quixote, he was unyielding in his declaration that there was no social relationship which was either necessary or unchangeable. The overwhelming nature of Foucault's challenge was to construct a literary history that effectively addressed the plurality of cultural discourse in Latin America. Our response was to organize this section on the basis of five related but clearly distinct units: 1) religious, scientific, and political discourse; 2) orality; 3) the diversity of discourses in theater and public theatricality; 4) popular culture, and 5) cinema (see Vol. I, Section 3: <<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/lithist/1engdetail.html>>).

### **A History of Literary Culture: Texts, Poets, and Events**

What if we were to change the historical focus from the traditional paradigm of the author and/or his works, to a concerted examination of the context in which they were written and received?

How would we organize our inquiry? How could we cope with the multiplicity of the social codes on the one hand and the reductionist tendencies of the institutions of literature on the other? Obviously, we could lose the disciplinary unity of a biographical dictionary of poets and of the corpus of their work, but what we could gain would be a historical narrative of the poet's appropriation of his/her own culture and other cultures which he/she encountered and, on a deeper level, the role as a nodal figure in the development of literary culture. Even a cursory glance at this kind of material would reveal a series of tensional opposites, sometimes irresolvable contradictions and, at other times, points of conflict and encounter that would lead to historical ruptures. As comparative literary historians, let us begin by recognizing that the designation of Latin America is a completely artificial construct. Yet, by the same token, we must also recognize that there are areas of social and cultural dynamics throughout the continent that have become cultural zones of interaction. In undertaking the historical consideration of both the production and the reception of the cultural imaginary in Latin America, we are exploring an essential aspect of historical life -- the way peoples imagine themselves and others -- and we are also cutting across national borders, geographic regions, time periods, linguistic systems, and cultural traditions. Establishing the broader context, political, religious and social, in which literary culture flows is a challenge of some consequence to the comparative literary historian. But, above all, we must come to grips with syncretic cultural expression and mestizo cultural identity. Clearly, there can be no attempt to gain a comprehensive historical examination over such a vast and complex area with hundreds of years of conflictive history.

Latin America is too diverse and multifaceted to permit such synthesis. Nevertheless a comparative cultural history can, by focusing on connections, inform discussions of the historical problematics by insisting on foregrounding all aspects of inclusion and exclusion to legitimation, and by maintaining a reflexive self-questioning, one that is central to a hermeneutic approach. In order to anchor such vast cultural diversity and social variability, we have undertaken the transcultural examination of the centers of cultural production and of the institutions with control over this production. The texts and events of production thus enter the historical commentary, unfolding a richer contextualization that is open ended. Thus, the vast scope of the undertaking -- an entire continent, living in numerous distinct languages both European and Amerindian over the last five hundred years -- put enormous pressure on us not to lose sight of the narrative requirements of writing history. We had to tell the story of Latin American culture, but we were committed to not impose closure. Our solution was a second volume that brought together institutional modes and cultural modalities. This volume has three parts: 1) cultural institutions; 2) textual models and, finally, 3) the cumulative synopsis, the cultural centers of the continent (see Volume Two at <<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/lithist/2engdetail.html>>).

It is not by chance that today we have a widespread rejection of the validity of literary history and we retain only its most basic function, that of giving an initial orientation to students. The last quarter of the twentieth century has been characterized by a retreat, if not a withdrawal, from the horizon of expectation of literary history as historical knowledge. At the same time we have seen a drastic narrowing of the space of historical experience to biography and appreciation, equating it to that of personal testimonial of status and taste. On the one hand, some historians have gone so far as to say that literary history is not history but merely opinion with dates and, on the other, deconstructive critics have claimed that there is no authority in writing about texts from the past beyond our own testimonial of how we have read them. The first rejection of academic literary history, and still one of the most powerful, was Roland Barthes's 1963 *Sur Racine* (148). If Ralph Cohen in his "A Note on New Literary History" could state more than thirty years ago that literary history was rejected as scholarship, and if today we no longer bother to consider it to be more than an introduction to literary study (6), it is because we are in a time of major change in literary and historical scholarship. For many, expectation has given way to cynicism or to taking refuge in neo-Marxist or essentialist utopias.

Tradition has become the mausoleum of literature. But my position is that this critical juncture far from being an apocalyptic ending is a time of intense development of new directions. The task of writing what Ricoeur calls effective literary history is very much a part of the present critical pe-

riod when all the assumptions of the past have been openly questioned, when not deconstructed. In hermeneutic terms, the dialectic between the expectation of knowing the past and the experience of knowing the text is translated into a creative tension of inquiry. A breakdown of the historical inquiry results if the expectation of knowing breaks off from the space of experience into a non-dialectic opposition with no relation between them. This break of the horizon of expectation with the space of experience is best known to us today as essentialism, whether it be religious or gender related. Without using the hermeneutic terminology for the dialectic engagement I have been advocating, Homi Bhabha similarly argues in *The Location of Culture* (1994) that we may then "see how modernity and postmodernity are themselves constituted from the marginal perspective of cultural difference. They encounter themselves contingently at the point at which the internal difference of their own society is reiterated in terms of the difference of the other, the alterity of the postcolonial site" (196). This breakdown has already happened in some quarters of deconstructive literary criticism and what in North America is called cultural studies. Effective literary history draws upon the continuous dialectic between the horizon of expectation that demands explanation and the space of experience that recognizes the limitations of understanding. Most of the literary histories written in Latin America fall into two categories. On the one hand, we have written monumental literary history with its parade of genius and masterpieces. On the other hand, we have from time to time written antiquarian literary history which, abandoning the critical sense of the present, values everything that can be assembled from the past.

Monumental literary history decontextualizes literature by presenting ideas, styles of writing, and creativity in isolation from the social reality. Antiquarian literary history, by attempting an undifferentiated preservation of the past, reduces the past to nominalism: titles, but no inquiry into the writing. Today monumental literary history engenders hostility for its implicit totalization, but antiquarian literary history only induces boredom. The paradigm shift of effective literary history displaces the disembodied record of genius as well as the nostalgic reverence of everything from the past and turns to the communities whose literary culture is under scrutiny. The user, i.e. the reader, of effective history is thereby given accessibility to the past of literary culture. The demands of effective history of literary cultures are multiple and the proliferation of specialized information is so vast that this scholarship has been induced to follow the path, long used in the sciences, of collaborative research. The requirements for successful collaborative research in literary history are in fact the basic rules of operation in experimental science but they are quite new in literary history. Collaborative research demands a high degree of mutual involvement, dialogue, and a common adherence to the task of developing the conceptual model. Therefore, the imposition of any previously designed plan or a simple division of labour are procedures that do not warrant this designation of collaborative research. In many respects the example of Braudel's work is exemplary of the collaborative histories we have put together for Latin America and East Central Europe. As early as 1958 Braudel had recognized in his article, "La longue durée," the importance of collaborative research: "There is a crisis in the human sciences today; they are all burdened with their own success. The accumulation of new knowledge has made it necessary to engage in collective research, for which it is crucial to have intelligent organization. All the human sciences whether its practitioners like it or not, directly or indirectly, are affected by the progress of the most able among them; this collective engagement is resisted by a retrograde humanism which can no longer serve as a research frame" (1958, 725; my translation).

The conceptual models of collaborative literary history can only come about through extended and intensive exchange of ideas in response to the historiographic problems that have been selected for study. Once the collectively designed conceptual model begins to take shape the pattern of research we call collaborative can begin. The requisites are the same whether we are talking about physics or literary culture. All the researchers must have a full and commonly held grasp of the model, and of the interface between specific areas of research. The over-all design must be clear at all times and the means for continual development and elaboration must be in place so that the conceptual model is not complete until the research project has been completed. Let us turn to David Carr: "To tell the story of a community and of the events and actions that make up its history is simply to continue, at a somewhat more reflective and usually more retrospective

level the story-telling process through which the community constitutes itself and its actions" (177). With these words he begins his conclusion to his book *Time, Narrative and History* (1986). I cite it here as the point of departure for my basic thesis that de-objectifies literature and that removes it from the prevalent concept that it is only a cultural commodity. In philosophical terms, my thesis is that literature stands at the centre of a linguistic community's identity with the all important qualifier that language and, therefore, linguistic communities are not self-contained. How can we cope with the complex problem of writing a history of literary culture that captures the sense of identity of the diverse communities? Our solution was to engage Latin American identity as one that begins bifurcated by the violence of conquest and slowly develops through a discourse of melancholy to a search for legitimation, finally pouring forth in the multiple discourses of modernity. This is the first section of Volume 3 (see at <<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/lithist/3engdetail.html>>).

In *Time and Narrative* (1986-88), Ricoeur gives us what is one of the finest expositions of his hermeneutic premise, one that culminates a mode of inquiry developed from 1955 to 1985. He writes that temporality is the structure of human existence and that it resides in language as narrativity. Language as a mode of living is constituted through narrativity and its ultimate referent is time. The claim is a strong one: that the nature of human time itself is narrativistic. Thus the argument is that historians do not impose narrative form on facts constituted as events that might be otherwise presented through non-narrative discourse, but rather, Ricoeur argues, that historical events themselves in the minds and memories of participants have the same structure as narrative discourse. It is, consequently, this narrative structure that distinguishes historical events from natural events. The presence of human agency which is central to a historical event can transform a natural event like an earthquake or a flood into a historical event. But not all narrative accounts can be accepted as history. For example, Ricoeur writes, journalistic accounts of events may be well informed and make sense of the facts of the case at hand. Yesterday's political speech may be well described, with a prudent distance of analysis, and still fall short of being history, and this is so because the journalist's story lacks the secondary referentiality of a story within a story. The historian is not a reporter of past events; historians are mediators between events and certain experiences of temporality. Thus, there is a poetics of history and a professional critique of the methods of research and also of the ways of emplotting events. A history is a narrative account that reaches conclusions and can be taken as a whole and thus exceeds by far the sum of the sentences that it contains. To emplot a sequence of events transforms the writing from being only a chronicle of incidents into forming a story. This mediation is the ultimate task of the historian. Emplotment is therefore both necessary and always limited, open to question. But to say that one form of emplotment is flawed is not the same as saying that the historian could do without the construction of causality. The plot can be depersonalized and human agency can be deferred, but the presentation of an event is also the presentation of how and why the event happened. The meaning of stories is given in their emplotment. By emplotment a sequence of events is configured (grasped together) in such a way as to represent -- symbolically -- what would otherwise be unutterable in language, namely, the ineluctable aporetic nature of the human experience of time.

Historical discourse is a privileged instantiation of the human capacity to endow the experience of time with meaning because the immediate referent of this discourse is real, rather than imaginary, events. Historians cannot invent the events of their stories; they must find them. This is so because historical events have already been created by past human agents, and by their actions produced lives worthy of having stories told about them. The construction of the historical event is nothing less than the assignation of meaning to a configuration of data that surrounds human action. J.W.N. Watkins sums up the discussion in his "Historical Explanation in the Social Sciences" (1959) thus: "Every complex social situation, institution or event is the result of a particular configuration of individuals, their dispositions, situations, beliefs, and physical resources and environment" (505). This means that the intentionality informing human actions, as against mere motions, takes us to the creation of lives that have the coherence of emplotted stories. The creation of a historical narrative is an action exactly like that by which historical events are themselves cre-

ated, but it is in the domain of narration rather than that of action. By discerning the plots prefigured in historical actions by the agents that produced them, and by configuring them as sequences of events having the coherence of stories, the historian makes history.

### **Literary History and Cultural History**

Literary history as a part of cultural history, be it national, regional or comparative, is the story of stories. In formulating emplotment literary historians have developed historiographic constructs as plotting scripts. The script favored in monumental literary history is the idea of "the tradition" or even "the great tradition" (see, e.g., Leavis, *The Great Tradition*; Menéndez y Pelayo, *Historia de las ideas estéticas en España*, and in comparative literary history the preferred device has been the literary movement (see, e.g., Balakian, *The Symbolist Movement in the Literature of European Languages*). While historical meaning is prefigured in the actions of historical agents, the agents themselves cannot foresee it because human actions have consequences that extend beyond the purview of those who perform them. This is why it is wrong for historians to limit themselves to trying to see things from the position of past agents alone, to trying to think themselves back into the mind or consciousness of past actors in the historical drama. They are fully justified in availing themselves of the advantages of hindsight. Moreover, they are fully justified in using the techniques of analysis developed by the social sciences of their own time in order to identify social forces at work in the agent's environment because these forces may have been only emergent in the agent's time and place and not perceivable to them. Human actions have consequences that are both foreseeable and unforeseeable, that are informed by intentions both conscious and unconscious, and that may be frustrated by contingent factors that are both knowable and unknowable. It is for this reason that narrative is necessary for the representation of "what actually happened" in a given domain of historical occurrence. A scientific historiography of the sort envisioned by the Annalists, which deals in large-scale, physical and social, anonymous forces, is not so much wrong as simply limited to telling only a part of the story of human beings at grips with their individual and collective destinies. It produces the historiographical equivalent of dehumanized drama that is all scene and no actors, or a novel that is all theme but lacking in characters. Such a historiography features all background and no foreground. The best it could provide would be a quasi-history comprising quasi-events, enacted by quasi-characters and displaying the form of Once a human being is allowed to enter such a scene, inhabited only by forces, processes and structures, it becomes impossible to resist the narrative mode of discourse for representing what is happening in that scene. Even Braudel must tell stories whenever human beings, acting as agents, are permitted to enter, to appear against the background of those forces that he would describe solely in quantitative and statistical terms. Braudel's vehement opposition to historical narrative must be contextualized as a reaction to the excesses of French historiography in this regard, but, as every reader of his *Mediterranean* (1949) knows, there is a strong narrative line that tells the story of the shift in power from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. The Braudel contribution cannot be overestimated. My work has gained greater insight because of his work. Braudel must tell stories in spite of the fact that it goes against his own conscious repudiation of narrativity as the principal impediment to the creation of a scientific historiography.

Ricoeur's insistence that history and literature share a common ultimate referent in human time represents a considerable advancement over previous discussions of relations between history and literature based on the supposed opposition of factual and fictional discourse. Historical narrative discourse alone is adequate to the representation of the experience of historicity in a way that is both literal, in what it asserts about specific events, and figurative, in what it suggests about the meaning of this experience. What the historical narrative literally asserts about specific events is that they really happened, and what it figuratively suggests is that the whole sequence of events that really happened has the order and significance of well-made stories. Narrative discourse does not simply reflect or passively register a world already made; it works up the material given in perception and reflection, fashions it, and creates something new, in precisely the same way that human agents by their actions fashion distinctive forms of historical life out of the world they inherit as their past. Thus conceived, a historical narrative is not only an icon of events, past or present, of which it speaks; it is also an index of the kinds of actions that produce the kinds of events

we wish to call historical. It is this indexical nature of historical narrative that assures the adequacy of its symbolic representations to the real events about which they speak. The indexical aspect of the historical narrative consists of three interrelated features: the references to events in other places and other times must be fluid so that the contextual framework is in evidence; the accuracy in describing participants must be such that they can become the referential points in other historical narratives; and finally, the material circumstances behind the event must be as fully constituted as possible. It is in this third feature that the Annalists found the traditional historical narratives of the nineteenth century wanting. Historical events can be distinguished from natural events by virtue of the fact that they are products of the actions of human agents seeking, more or less self-consciously, to endow the world in which they live with symbolic meaning. Historical events can be represented in symbolic discourse because such events are already themselves symbolic in nature; the narrativization of action by human agents has preceded the actual constitution of the event.

Narrativization, following Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative*, is the basis of human temporality. Therefore, the reports and documents upon which the historical narrative depends are already narrativized (Vol. 3, 104-26). So it is with the historian's composition of a narrative account of historical events: the narrativization of historical events effects a symbolic representation of the process by which human life is endowed with symbolic meaning. Historical narrative which takes the events created by human actions as its immediate subject does much more than merely describe those events; it also imitates them, that is, performs them, performs the same kind of creative act as those performed by historical agents. The performance of the historical narrative is the enactment of the past intended to be presented with the utmost accuracy but, above all, it is the configuration of meaning. History has meaning because human actions produce meanings. These meanings are continuous over the generation of human time. This continuity, in turn, is felt in the human experience of time organized as future, past, and present (rather than as a mere serial consecution). To experience time as future, past, and present (rather than as a series of instants in which every one has the same weight or significance as every other) is to experience historicity. This experience of historicity can be represented symbolically in narrative discourse because such discourse is a product of the same kind of figuration as the events themselves; they have beginnings, middles, and ends just as the actions of historical agents who figure their lives as meaningful stories. The meaning of history resides in its aspects as a drama of the human effort to endow life with meaning. This universal, human quest for meaning is carried out in the awareness of the corrosive power of time, but it is also made possible and given its distinctively human pathos by this very awareness. In this respect, that manner of being-in-the-world that we call historical is paradoxical and cannot be apprehended by human thought except in the form of an enigma. To sum up, prefigurative narrativity is the basis for temporality and, therefore, historical narrative offers us the only way to make sense out of past events. The historian's task is one of mediation between the events and the story of human agency that gives meaning to these events.

If the historian emplots events into a narrative account, we must now ask which events does the literary historian engage in the task of literary history, assuming that literary history is history. The assumption that literary history is history is so basic that it appears to be elementary, but if we examine the indexical nature of historical narrative we recognize that most literary histories fall far short of the mark in presenting the material circumstances of the event described. The reduction in narrative description of the material dimensions of production in literary culture is the principal cause for the separation of literary history from history (see Colebrook's *New Literary Histories* for an excellent review of the relationship between literature, literary history and history, 1-30). Can the composition and publication of a book be considered an event, or must we include the reception by the author's contemporaries as part of the event? And, if this were so, can we account for vastly changing modes of reception of the same work? Can a history of production concomitantly deal with a history of reception? The direct answer to this question is that if literary history aims at historical textuality, it must bring together the historicity of production (including material circumstances) with the historicity of reception in which the work is completed (see Achugar's commentary on the power politics of critical reading in *South America*, 53-72). Every form of history by necessity is an approximation to the past and although literary history shares

this limitation, it must consider that in addition to the historicity of production, the daunting history of reception is required (see Colebrook's discussion of Pierre Bourdieu's impact on literary history, especially with regard to the historicity of production, 90-111). This answer is obvious, but implementation is another matter.

If literary history is to regain its place within history, clearly all events of consequence in the development of a literary culture must be addressed. In our history an elaborate schema was created by our coordinator, Alberto Moreiras, that worked to bring out the fuller scope of the dominant ideologies behind the historical events; this second section of Volume 3 is organized in four historical phases: 1) lettered mediations; 2) peoples, communities and nation building; 3) the inversion of social Darwinism; and 4) modernization and the formation of cultural identities (see Volume Three at <<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/lithist/3engdetail.html>>.

### **The Hermeneutics of Literary History**

A hermeneutic historiography of literary history begins with the recognition of the essential problem of description of an event that must be constantly reconstituted. The reconstitution of the literary event differs from historical revision in that literary texts change in meaning from one climate of reception to another. The classic example is Don Quixote as the fool in the seventeenth century becoming the tragic hero of romanticism and the existential hero of the twentieth century. There is no question that the significance of past actions must first be understood in terms of their agents' own values and aesthetic perspectives and not in terms of our very different ones. But, on the other hand, to ignore the meanings of our own redescriptions of the events would be to play the fool. There are three preliminary tasks before us: to understand how our narrative form cannot escape our own value spectrum; to abandon the notion of a universal history; and to open up for scrutiny the concept of event itself. The cognitive function of the historian's narrative form is not a neutral compilation of a succession of facts and ascribed purpose and design; it is, above all, the making of a whole out of a number of interrelationships, which are not in themselves related by necessity but only by the historian's purpose of exposition. The assemblage of data used in the description of the historical event is never fixed because its make-up is not determined by physical necessity but rather by the demands of plausible exposition; thus it is that lists of foodstuffs stored in the royal palace could be, or not, part of the explanatory data depending on the direction the exposition takes. Narrative form is thus an artifice designed to represent a specific explanation for past activity. We would clearly expect that the narrative form used by a feminist, like Elaine Showalter, or a Marxist, like Fredric Jameson, would be the best instrument possible to further their historical ensemble as valid and presenting a general truth-claim. The identification of form with ideology should not be taken as negative. The point to be made is that every telling of a story is partial, limited and directed but that it is as valid as its telling allows for a debate with other versions. The debate amongst historians is a factor of the utmost consequence, for it is only through this conflict of interpretations that the historical event will be enlarged. In the case of literary history, the debate has been, for the most part, confined to the meaning of the texts and not the meaning of the historical event, but this is also changing rapidly with the return of literary history to history (see Cornejo Polar's *Escribir en el aire*, 11-24; also see "History as Theory" in Shapiro's *The Sense of Change: Language as History*, 114-19).

In literary history the designation of the aesthetic perspectives of the past, such as the baroque or romanticism, has been built up by a succession of literary historians, each revising or adding to the work of predecessors. A close examination of the principles and norms used to mark the beginning, apex and end of these perspectives indicates that the basis for the designation is in the narrative description of the differences between the idea of reality expressed in the texts and the idea of reality recognized by the historians as their own. The historian aims to make the aesthetic perspective as distinctive and well defined as possible as a cultural view that is different from both predecessors and successors, but the sense of difference is discernable only from the vantage point of the literary historian himself. Michel de Certeau has put it succinctly in his *The Writing of History* (1988): "The historian is no longer a person who shapes an empire. He or she no longer envisages the paradise of global history. The historian comes to circulate around acquired rationalizations. He or she works in the margins. In this respect the historian becomes a prowler" (79).

Works of literature are, of course, historical in their composition, but they are also in history as long as there continues to be reception recorded. Certain works of literature are therefore generators of social discourse in the life of a linguistic community and catalytic agents of change in other communities they reach altered through translation. A history of literature that seeks to grasp together the many versions of the literary work must find new ways of organization.

If the work of literature, its production and reception (in the original language and in translation) is the subject matter of literary history, then the literary work must be recast as a historical event, but as an event that multiplies in time with continuities and discontinuities. If, following Benveniste, we define the present as the moment when speakers make their utterances, then an event is always a retrospective construct and, at the core of this construct, there is an axial moment that allows the historian to date the event. R.G. Collingwood recognized that the making of a historical event is the imaginative reenactment proposed by the historian (see *The Idea of History*, 282-302). Although the production and reception are contemporary at the beginning, they bifurcate soon after, and commentary of reception rapidly exceeds commentary on the work's production. Both change with time; only the writing itself remains stable once it has been established as authoritative.

It can be said that by expanding the concept of historical event to include the vicissitudes of subsequent paradigms we have overloaded the argument and made literary history impossible. There is no doubt that by changing the concept of literary event to include reception we have changed the way in which literary history is written but, I would argue, we have also enriched the historical depth of the literary text. Not all literary works have a constant history of reception; most, in fact, have a very short time under critical scrutiny. Nevertheless, when a work from the past is brought into the historical record a number of different events are in play. When we include works, which come into the literary corpus in translation, a new event is introduced which is the rupture of re-contextualization. Works can suddenly be plunged into a linguistic and cultural community that is different and distant from the context of origin with extraordinary and unpredictable results, which sometimes can return as aesthetic ideas to the community of origin. A good case for this phenomenon can be made with the Latin American literature of the 1960s, which swept through the non-Spanish speaking world like a firestorm and has subsequently given rise to ideas of postmodernism that now return to Latin America as an aesthetic perspective (see, for example, Ortega's "Postmodernism in Spanish-American Writing" and Coutinho's "Postmodernism in Brazil").

What I have begun to sketch out is not so much a break with literary historians of the past, but rather a more reflective plan of operation and a rejection of the master narrative. I concur with David Perkins when he writes: "A text from the past embodies a lived experience, an aesthetic, a culture that is alien. Of course, it is not completely alien. Continuities and universals in human experience are the themes of antiquarian literary history and humanist criticism. But most literary histories emphasize the difference of the past" (184). However, I cannot agree with the either/or nature of his proposal when a few lines further he writes: "Here, incidentally, is why literary history cannot surrender the ideal of objective knowledge of the past. Though the ideal cannot be achieved, we must pursue it, for without it the otherness of the past would entirely deliquesce in endless subjective and ideological reappropriation" (185). His argument is that either we strive for objectivity or we risk getting caught in the morass of subjective relativity. Perkins concludes the paragraph with the telling statement: "A function of literary history, is then, to set the literature of the past at a distance, to make its otherness felt" (185). Indeed, but this function would be better served by a mode of interpretation that opened the past to the multiple varieties of present appropriations without closing the works or their context into a master narrative. My thesis is that the historical study of literature is the construction of a complex network of data, imaginative reenactment and interpretation. One primary aspect of study with respect to the elaboration of textual meaning by the historian is the literary truth-claim as the determinate basis of the literary configuration. The truth-claim of a literary text is the injunction to the reader that certain statements are to be taken as valid or true. The issue is not whether such claims are true or not, but rather that they function as claims to be true in the reception of the work. There are many different kinds of truth-claims in literature ranging from the empirical fact, to historical data, belief claims in God,

nation, etc., textual claims that certain events happened in the textual world itself, but what concerns me here is the historical weight of the truth-claim in creating a history of literature.

The historical significance of truth-claims has three principal factors to consider: the ways in which truth-claims are made in texts are a relatively conservative feature showing little change over the years; the generic forms which govern the use of truth-claims as discourse do change, but in an evolutionary process of gradual mutation; the aesthetic perspective which is always that of the historian looking at texts from the past is a relationship of difference and always alien to the text in spite of the historian's best effort to contextualize it. This is the difference between the historian's own sense of reality and that of the textual world, which is never the same as that composite construction of a historical period put together by historians. Thus there are three historicities at work in the aesthetic perspective: those of the historian, those of the text's emplotment, and the documentary reconstruction of what was purportedly the author's historicity. Major changes in aesthetic perspectives become evident perhaps two or three times in a century and as such present a history of textual commentary which must be inserted into both a history of reconstructions of the author's contexts as well as a history of reappropriations. Changes in aesthetic perspective have for the most part been absent in literary history; these changes in the conditions of reception have been primarily the domain of the cultural historian (see, for example, Henríquez Ureña's *Las corrientes literarias en América Hispánica*).

Although the way in which truth-claims are made does not change or changes slowly, the meaning of the truth-claim changes notably from one period to the next. This change is a change in the vantage point of successive literary commentators as each has a perspective necessarily determined by the ideas of reality generated by their own linguistic and cultural community. These changes in perspective are discernable through the examination of the difference in the present meaning of texts from their past significance. A good example is that of Stephen Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988), which constructs a context for his commentary of Shakespeare's works. Greenblatt does not claim this discursive context is directly attributable to Shakespeare himself, nor does he assert that his interpretation be final. Greenblatt offers us his study of Renaissance England as a time, place and culture that are quite alien to us but that we can understand through the difference. The significance of Greenblatt's work has been recognized by contemporary criticism as the groundwork for "new historicism" (see Colebrook, 198-219). Once again, I turn to David Perkins to state the argument for the other side, for literary history as a master narrative that imposes closure on the works of the past. Perkins continues: "But narrative literary history, intent on explaining the events it portrays, must leave the reader's imagination less scope. It does not and cannot give the whole story, as the examples we analysed abundantly illustrate. But all that it does give must hang together. Events that do not cohere do not explain each other. Interpretations that are potentially open must be closed by argument" (48). I take issue with Perkins's description of the task confronting the writing of literary history. My disagreement is with his dismissal of alternatives to the closed literary histories of the past. A comparative history of Latin American literary cultures as effective history aims to be a history of pluralities joined together under the perennially contested designation of Latin America. It is not a straightforward record of books and authors from a determined place; it offers a provisional dialectic grid of inquiry to challenge the epistemological privilege of evidence by adding perspective. These are often presented in the interrogative form. Thus, among the new questions the history seeks to address are: Why a plurality of literatures? What are the parameters of Latin America as spatial and as human geography? What is meant by a cultural formation and, most pertinent to the case, why should the pursuit of literary history entertain such notions as cultural formations? The idea is to construct a history without closure, one that can be entered through many points and can unfold through many coherent, informed, and focused narrative lines. A history without closure would appear to be a contradiction in terms according to David Perkins. I disagree.

Closure is imposed on the historical narrative when the historian tries to circumscribe events and thus give a rational explanation to the way in which the past unfolded. An open history presents the events and delineates multiple consequences without closing off any, for history, as Foucault has reminded us, is not linear except in the fantasies of historians. There are multiple rup-

tures, new beginnings and folds that juxtapose the distant past and the present. The twentieth century in Latin America has been a time of immense change alongside of a certain timelessness or a sense of repeating cycles of oppression and liberation. The last two sections of our history have mapped some of these ruptures, cycles and radical change within the framework of the previous sections. Section 3 of volume 3 focuses on the rise of new and the return of old literatures to the mainstream of engagement. First, we look at Amerindian literary cultures as a significant presence at the end of the twentieth century; we then turn to the emergence of Latino literary cultures in the United States. We conclude the long voyage that began with cultural geography with an overview of literary culture in Latin America's twentieth century as a time of rapid and radical change. There are three parts: 1) historic displacements; 2) Modernity, Modernisms and their avatars; and 3) ideologies and imaginaries. This is a history of hundreds of communities linked by language, history, or economic patterns. The material conditions of these communities will serve as the mapped background against which to examine the institutions and the literary culture they share. The value of cultural artifacts such as literature lies, in part, in the ways these expressions are held in common -- in other words, their exchange value and the measure of their use. What do we aim to give our readers? A narrative by many hands about narratives as lived reality, then and now, or to put it differently, a literary history worthy of being considered history.

Note: A longer and more detailed version of the above paper is included in *Rethinking Literary History*. Ed. Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002 and in the *The Oxford Comparative History of Latin American Literary Cultures*. Ed. Mario J. Valdés and Djelal Kadir. 3 vols. Oxford: Oxford UP, forthcoming in 2003.

#### Works Cited

- Achugar, Hugo. "El parnaso es la nación o reflexiones a propósito de la violencia de la lectura y el simulacro." *Esplendores y miserias del siglo XIX*. Ed. Beatriz González Stephan, et al. Caracas: Monte Avila, 1994. 53-72.
- Balakian, Anna. *The Symbolist Movement in the Literature of European Languages*. Budapest: Akadémiai, 1982.
- Barthes, Roland. *Sur Racine*. Paris: Seuil, 1963.
- Benveniste, Emile. *Problemas de lingüística general*. Vol. 1. Trans. Juan Almela. Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1972. 179-97.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Braudel, Fernand. "La longue durée." *Annales* 13.1 (1958): 725-53.
- Braudel, Fernand. *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*. 1949. Vol. I. Trans. Siân Reynolds. 2 vols. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.
- Carr, David. *Time, Narrative and History*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986.
- Certeau, Michel de. *The Writing of History*. Trans. Tom Conley. New York: Columbia UP, 1988.
- Cohen, Ralph. "A Note on New Literary History." *New Literary History* 1.1 (1969): 3-6.
- Colebrook, Claire. *New Literary Histories*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997.
- Collingwood, R.G. *The Idea of History*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1946.
- Cornejo Polar, Antonio. *Escribir en el aire*. Lima: Horizonte, 1994.
- Coutinho, Eduardo F. "Postmodernism in Brazil." *International Postmodernism*. Ed. Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1997. 327-34.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things*. New York: Random House, 1994.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988.
- Henríquez Ureña, Pedro. *Las corrientes literarias en América Hispánica*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1949.
- Jauss, Hans Robert. *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982.
- Leavis, F. R. *The Great Tradition*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1948.
- Menéndez Pelayo, Marcelino. *Historia de las ideas estéticas en España*. Santander: Biblioteca Menéndez Pelayo, 1985.
- Ortega, Julio. "Postmodernism in Spanish-American Writing." *International Postmodernism*. Ed. Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1997. 315-26.
- Perkins, David. *Is Literary History Possible?* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. Trans. Kathleen Blaney and David Pellauer. 3 vols. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986-88.
- Shapiro, Michael. *The Sense of Change. Language as History*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991.
- Taylor, Charles. *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995.
- Watkins, J.W.N. "Historical Explanation in the Social Sciences." *Theories of History*. Ed. Patrick Gardiner. New York: The Free P, 1959.

Author's Profile: Mario J. Valdés has taught comparative literature and Spanish at the University of Toronto since 1963 and holds the Chair in Iberoamerican Studies at the University of Toronto. His interests and publica-

tions encompass the ontology of literary texts, comparative literary history, and the hermeneutics of poetics. His many publications include *Death in the Literature of Unamuno* (1964, 1966), *The Identity of the Literary Text* (1982), *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination* (1991), *World-Making: The Literary Truth-Claim and the Study of Literature* (1992), and *Hermeneutics of Poetic Sense* (1998). Valdés is editor, with Djelal Kadir, of the *The Oxford Comparative History of Latin American Literary Cultures* (Oxford UP, forthcoming in 2003). E-mail: <[m.valdes@utoronto.ca](mailto:m.valdes@utoronto.ca)>.