

Catalan and Galician Literatures in Iberian and European Contexts

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### Recommended Citation

Rodríguez González, Olivia. "Catalan and Galician Literatures in Iberian and European Contexts." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.5 (2011): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1913>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1913)

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**Volume 13 Issue 5 (December 2011) Article 14**  
**Olivia Rodríguez González,**  
**"Catalan and Galician Literatures in Iberian and European Contexts"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss5/14>>

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 13.5 (2011)**  
Special issue **New Trends in Iberian Galician Comparative Literature.**  
**Ed. María Teresa Vilariño Picos and Anxo Abuín González**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss5/>>

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**Abstract:** In her article "Catalan and Galician Literatures in Iberian and European Contexts" Olivia Rodríguez González investigates the problematics of canon formation and proposes an approach within which the formation of a multi-system canon is possible. Reflections on the constitution of a European canon that would be the result of a proportional or market-driven combination of national literary canons leads to the conclusion that, with respect to the multicultural Spanish state, what will succeed in getting into the European canon will do so as a consequence of one of two processes. The first depends on what each literary system does to project itself to the outside world. The second refers to any planning that may be implemented by the Spanish (i.e., Iberian) interliterary system as an indirect route for projecting each of the peninsular literatures: Castilian, Basque, Catalan, Galician, and even Portuguese literature.

**Olivia RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ**

### **Catalan and Galician Literatures in Iberian and European Contexts**

The literary canon represents a struggle for power, and sometimes for survival, by producers of culture who compete within the field of cultural consumption. Within the political shaping of the European Union, the development of which many readers will have witnessed first-hand, the literature that Europe has produced in the past and is producing now occupies a place in the "sociosphere" of its culture, as it was understood by Juri Lotman. Now is a good time to contribute to the conscious formation of a European canon that will reflect the cultural diversity of the continent, the complexity of which is reflected in the hard struggle on the part of all concerned to get through the selection procedure. What is meant here, of course, is a contribution from mediation, consisting of a theoretical and comparativist analysis of the processes of canon formation, with empirical data to prevent any slide into unhelpful idealizations. In Europe cultural canons are arising in the powerful countries that speak English, German, French, and perhaps Spanish. Alongside them there is a host of smaller cultures, no less worthy, deserving a proportional space in this canon. If it is agreed that this should contain literatures that combine aesthetic strength (to use Harold Bloom's expression from his *The Anxiety of Influence*) with politico-economic market strength (Bourdieu qtd. in Guillory 5-6), now is the time to offer interesting products from all parts of the Europe and so on equal terms. Reflections on the constitution of a European canon that would be the result of a proportional or market-driven combination of national literary canons leads to the conclusion that, with respect to the multicultural Spanish state, what will succeed in getting into the European canon will do so as a consequence of one of two processes. The first depends upon what each literary system does to project itself to the outside world. The second refers to any planning that may be implemented by the Spanish (or even the Iberian) interliterary system, as an indirect route for projecting each of the peninsular literatures: Castilian, Basque, Catalan, Galician, and even Portuguese literature. These two possibilities are put forward according to concepts of Dionýz Ďurišin's framework of the interliterary system and Itamar Even-Zohar's framework of the polysystem (for the frameworks' application in the Iberian context, see, e.g., Cabo; Casas).

Thanks to translations, book fairs, or meetings between publishers, such as the yearly Frankfurt Book Fair or the Guadalajara International Book Fair held in Mexico (not far behind the former in impact); thanks to regular exchange visits to universities, involving funding for lecturers and language assistants or lectors, and also to the holding of congresses and seminars, each Iberian literature is working on its projection to the outside world. This is one of the mediations which reinforces systemic strength, something which cannot be achieved through mere self-sufficiency at a survival level in the cultural sociosphere (see, e.g., Schmidt). As an example, I refer to the *Asociación Internacional de Estudos Galegos* which has already organized eight triennial congresses aimed at encouraging research into Galician culture around the world. However, since the "spreading" of an ethnic minority culture is a question of European cultural policy, it must be handled according to the relevant rules of the game, on the assumption that consensus about a constitution is finally reached. In this case, since direct political representation of European nations not having their own state or sharing a state with other nations will not be possible, it is clear that this level of representation will have to be channelled through the mediation of the cultural policies of the Kingdom of Spain. Tasks of direct projection will then remain for other types of subsidiary labour. These tasks should by no means be given up, just as they were not abandoned in the past, when these literatures were completely unsupported, despite their repercussions within the Castilian literary system. For example, among the minority literatures concerned here, Catalan literature maintained a strategic position, both geographically and economically, in a fluid dialogue with European cultures, especially the French. Likewise, Galician literature undertook a programme towards the start of the twentieth century, just after the First World War, which was intended to create a dialogue with universal culture, without passing through the Spanish gateway of expression in Castilian. These direct efforts should be focussed on maintaining a niche in the Spanish canon.

It should not be forgotten, either, that these literatures in minority languages were the target of persecution under the Franco dictatorship. In an attempt to communicate this situation to outside

observers, recourse was made to UNESCO at its meeting at Montevideo in Uruguay in 1954 (see Alonso). Here the representatives of participating European countries were able to learn that these cultures were surviving despite attempts to crush them and that Spanish culture was neither unitary nor monolingual, as the Spanish authorities of the day tried to convey to the rest of the world. More than seventy years later, the consequences of this repression are still to be seen. To sum up, if an international presence is sought, an internal presence must first be achieved. This must go beyond the traditional contributions by the various Iberian literatures to the hegemonic system, arriving as cultural "impacts" that are simply absorbed, at best, into the Spanish system. It is now a question of creating a canon that is truly inter-systemic, with original contributions from literature in Castilian and from the minority literatures. The expression "minority" must not be eschewed under the pressure of political correctness, which tars it with the brush of pejorative connotations, in a rather perverse interpretation of the concept of democracy. The emergence of the Western canon similar to local canons developed over time in a process of cultural memory and a result of various systemic factors. Some of these would fall under the heading of what in Even-Zohar's framework is called institution, a set of factors involved in the control of culture (producers, critics, educational institutions, publishers, the press, teachers, and so forth). The fact that there are various co-existing canonical repertoires in a polysystem and that cultural agents can have an influence over their construction and destruction, is obvious.

The nineteenth-century Catalan project for the revitalization of its own system through the medieval-style *Jocs Florals* is worthy of note. The originals were festivals in medieval courts where the splendour of Catalan troubadour poetry became known, in close connection with Provençal poetry. The creation of the avant-garde art industry in Catalonia just after the turn of the century should be kept in mind, as should the politico-cultural project of *Noucentisme* (new century movement) during the 1920s, to which so much is owed by Spanish literary historiography. This is one of the few instances when this historiography has decided to import a term from Catalan approaches in order to divide literature into periods that are strongly identified with the Catalan movement, always looked down upon by centralizing Castilian culture. The same thing occurred with respect to Galician, where this term appeared once more in the *Historia da Literatura Contemporánea* (1963) by Ricardo Carballo Calero applied to the history of Galician literature. In recent years, however, the latest Catalan views on division into periods have completely rejected the labels "Disaster of 1898" or "Generation of 1898," seeing them as associated with an aspect of the policies of the centralizing State and with a group marked ideologically by a Castilian-centric worldview. Parallel to this change, histories of Spanish literature have been gradually abandoning the expression *Novecentismo*, the translation of the Catalan word.

At a more recent period of time it is worth considering the creation of the Valencian language. This was the outcome of a modification of language history, encouraged by the cultural separatism of the *Partido Unión Valenciana*, whose policies were later taken on board by the *Partido Popular* (a conservative party) and the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* in Valencia. And in Galicia there was a project to create a Galician culture by means of the incorporation of Celtic mythology (on this, see, e.g., MacCarthy; Palacios González) invented by James MacPherson, of the supposed works of the bard Ossian, son of Fingal, in 1765. His greatest mediator was Manuel Murguía, the author of the canonical work, *Los Precursores* (1886), which was influential in orienting a future repertoire. In it he enshrined the poetry of Rosalía de Castro and Eduardo Pondal for posterity. By contrast, he tried to exclude Valentín Lamas Carvajal, although this writer was to become the author of what is still probably today the best selling book in the history of Galician literature, *O catecismo do labrego* (1889). From another vantage point, Murguía, an influential figure in the formation of the Galician literary canon, attempted to demonize the naturalist writer Emilia Pardo Bazán, casting her against those who chose Galician for their literary productions. However, at that time she was the first novelist to bring into her work the hidden depths of the Galician world, both rural and urban, in books such as *La Tribuna* (1882), *Los Pazos de Ulloa* (1886) or *La Madre Naturaleza* (1887). Murguía could not forgive Pardo Bazán her involvement as a critic of Galician literature, nor her work on the recovering of the region's folklore. He defended the use of Galician by writers from the area, although he did so in Castilian, this paradox arising from the sociolinguistic history of Galicia: his writings targeted the educated class in Galicia, a cultured class that was for the most part urban and Castilian-speaking. In

contrast, the novelist Pardo Bazán declared herself in favor of the euthanasia of the minority language, to the benefit of strengthening a universal speech towards which, it was believed at the time, all converged in their evolution.

When it comes to more current times, it is possible to see how in Galicia a movement is reacting against the invisibility of literatures from the periphery in the Spanish polysystem canon. One of the most recent strategies is the creation of a Galician Literary Critics Section, incorporated within the already solidly constituted Association of Writers in the Galician Language. From an outsider's viewpoint it may seem strange that an association of writers includes a section for literary critics. Two systemic reasons may give an explanation for this. The first reason is that the Galician literary system is complex, varied, and shot through with a Castilian subsystem which includes a strong presence of Galician born authors (apart from the already mentioned Pardo Bazán, names such as those of Ramón del Valle Inclán, Julio Camba, and Gonzalo Torrente Ballester spring to mind), and which still requires an excessive load of interrelated tasks from its agents. This means that it is felt to be natural for authors and critics to rub shoulders within one single institutional framework, an association recognized throughout the Kingdom of Spain, and the only body that can, for instance, propose Galician literature candidates for Nobel Prizes. Activities which by their nature ought to be separated in a fully normalized system, like the creation and criticism of literature, are considered to be joint activities by producers and mediators. Unity is still strength in a system so recently consolidated. Hence, nobody should be surprised to find people working together to ensure the system can stand up to powerful market forces coming from elsewhere in the Peninsula and finding a strong response among Galicians. This explanation is even clearer in the light of statistics on the use of Galician, which is increasingly on the decline among young people, even though the newer generations have a good reading competence in the language.

The second reason, which is more directly linked to the matter in hand, is the need for institutionalized literary criticism so as to give support at a peninsular level for the region's proposals for a joint literary canon. In this way, it would be possible to avoid situations like those arising during the deliberations of the juries for National Literature Prizes, situations which would be wholly comic, if they were not also a sad reflection of the state of affairs. These prizes are organized by the Spanish Ministry of Culture and can be awarded to books from various literary genres published in Spain in any of the languages with an official status. Although all the juries have representatives from each academy (Spanish, Catalan, Basque and Galician) and these try as hard as possible to get their views heard, it is the case that most of the members of juries seem incapable of reading any other language than Castilian. Whether they are unable or unwilling, the fact is that works not written in Castilian do not succeed in getting through this unjust first filter. The author can vouch for this empirically on the basis of participation in the Drama Prizes in 2005, which permitted questioning of members about what usually occurred. Moreover, these claims are supported by the statement made by the Galician writing in Castilian, Javier Alfaya, during a debate in which the author himself had raised the question:

I have been on juries for National Literature Prizes on a number of occasions, covering poetry, translation and narrative. In fact, practically nobody reads languages other than Castilian on these juries, so some pretty pathetic situations crop up... From time to time somebody will have a twinge of conscience and say "Why don't we give the prize to so-and-so?" This would be somebody writing in Catalan or in Galician that nobody had read, but since it was a nationwide prize, we ought to make an effort ... Once I found myself asking "But have you read this stuff?" "No, but you know, last year they gave it to a Basque, last year (sic) they gave it to somebody from Leon, so why don't we give it to a Galician?" This is no way to run the show. I'm afraid that what happens in this country is that there is a whole generation (myself included) that was brought up in total ignorance of the other literatures. (unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine)

He estado varias veces en los jurados de los Premios Nacionales de Literatura, en poesía, en traducción y en narrativa. Efectivamente, prácticamente nadie lee otras lenguas que no sea el castellano en esos jurados; y entonces se da una situación casi patética... De vez en cuando a alguien le entraba mala conciencia y decía "¿Por qué no le damos el premio a éste? Era un escritor en catalán o un escritor gallego que nadie había leído, pero, al ser un premio estatal, tendríamos que hacer un esfuerzo... Una vez me he encontrado diciendo "¿Pero habéis leído esto?" "No, pero ya sabes, es que el año pasado se lo dieron a un vasco, el año pasado (sic) se lo dieron a un leonés, ¿por qué no se lo damos a un gallego?" Esto no es manera de funcionar. Yo me temo que lo que ocurre en este país es que una generación entera (de la que formo parte) fue educada en un desconocimiento absoluto de las otras literaturas. (Fundación Alternativas 45)

However, what is of more interest than the Galician, Catalan, or Castilian canons in themselves is the process of becoming part of them. For this purpose, one must resort to now classic system theories, such as the above mentioned frameworks and/or to the concept of semiotics of culture (Lotman), in order to grasp that canonization is the responsibility of all those involved in processes of cultural communication. It is not, as Harold Bloom seemed to claim in his *The Western Canon*, an individual move by people diachronically rereading the Western tradition from their own personal and exclusive timeframe. Bloom's theory should probably be dismissed as a consequence of the context of the scholarly caught up in the 1990s, bidding for positions of power related to the funding for US-American universities. José María Pozuelo Yvancos has explained this context in his analysis of the contribution Lotman made to the theory of the canon. Thus, the crux of the matter is how "transfers" (Even-Zohar) occur. These are movements of elements from the periphery to the centre of the system and vice-versa. This calls for research into what circumstances they occur in and what factors favour them at each point in the unstoppable development making up a literature's movement through tensions between various elements, until they occupy a place in the canon. It should be kept in mind that this movement implies a new but plausible rereading of the past, which the theoreticians of literary history use as a rallying point in their defence of a continuous revision of literary historiography.

In the process of canonization, the conditions of the sociocultural sphere must be kept in mind, especially the role of agents as its driving force, institutionalizing a literary system that hopes to survive over time and weather invasions from outside. When Lotman was studying the frontiers that separate culture from non-culture — the internal semiotic space from the external where there is no meaning — he was pointing towards the question of exchanges and the relationships between what is one's own, recognized and meaningful, and what is alien, unrecognized and meaningless. As he saw it, art needs non-art for its development. In his view in artistic development not only artistic texts play a part; culture needs a dynamic correlation with the sphere of non-culture, with the non-signifying, non-textual, non-semiotic existence of humans that are external to it. This same idea is found, not just in the earlier theorists of culture who served as a source for Lotman, but also in the work of Spanish intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth century such as Eugenio d'Ors and Vicente Martínez Risco Agüero. Nowadays, they are somewhat forgotten in the Hispanic cultural canon, a situation perhaps not unrelated to the fact that one was Catalan and the other Galician.

In his 1968 *Orden y caos*, also a posthumous book, Risco Agüero utilizes the geographical concepts of Eugenio d'Ors, "ecumenical" in opposition to "exoteric," which are keys to his methodology for investigating cultures (549-59). He does make one small but important adjustment to the model proposed by d'Ors, a defender of the unity of culture. Risco Agüero has an approach involving a set of different sociospheres beyond which there is no overarching system. The ecumenical is the place of higher culture. The exoteric is the geographical framework that a given culture does not reach. It is the place of chaos, a constant threat which leads there to be unending tension in the ecumenical. To this is added the fact that for each culture there is a relative exoteric, represented by those cultures which are perceived as different. This sensation of being exoteric, arising from that which is incomprehensible, is stronger between cultures that border on each other. Even so, the call of the exoteric is continuous and attractive, because it is with outside elements that the ecumenical renews itself, as well as using them as a rubbish pile onto which it can throw what it does not wish to take to its own. Recalling the old theory of "acculturation," Risco Agüero explains that the ecumenical may suffer an impact from outside that it is not able to assimilate. If it can handle the impact, it may be very capable of absorbing it and making it its own. This Galician intellectual had taken a leaf out of his own book, sharing the cultural programme developed through the journal *Nós*, which consisted of getting ahead of the cultural impact, resisting and simultaneously incorporating alien elements. The theorist V.M. Aguiar e Silva, when referring to the emerging literatures in the Luso-Brazilian polysystem, gives a good description of this capacity of the literary system to retrieve prior states after an impact — this capacity to resist — which tends towards a bilateral relationship of symbiosis or of conflict. In a lecture delivered in November 2004 at the University of A Coruña he put forward certain ideas that were soon to be published. The capacity for recovery after an impact was labelled with a term taken from physics, *resiliência*. With respect to "emerging literature," this was understood



as literature just beginning to manifest itself. To put it another way, it was literature which incorporated some novel feature according to pre-existing memories.

With these ideas of d'Ors, Risco Agüero, and Aguiar e Silva it is possible to explain why an analysis of the Spanish literary polysystem reveals cases of resistance, absorption, or expulsion of alien or outside elements. The central level of this polysystem is occupied in Castilian, whose hegemony extends the boundaries of the periphery. It is here that it attempts to stifle the expression of alien elements, considering them dangerous and liable to break down frontiers. However, these elements are necessary, just as the periphery needs the center, to renew itself as well. If the barrier separating this hegemonic system from the neighbouring exoteric systems were less formidable, it would be possible to achieve a balanced inter-systemic dialogue rather than the state of mutual unawareness that currently prevails. Hence, strategies require immediate change. Moreover, the peripheral literatures must recognize the political strength of a literary system that uses a language spoken by more than 400 million people, whose cultural agents are coming to feel that this is the right moment for expanding and projecting their own canon into a globalized western world dominated by English. Hispanic literatures of lesser size will have to take advantage of this platform in a shared political project without hesitation. This was the idea expressed by the director of the Instituto Cervantes between 2004 and 2007, César Antonio Molina, who sees the present day as a unique historical opportunity both for Castilian and for the other languages of Spain: "While Spanish, our lingua franca, advances, the other languages and cultures of Spain will advance as well. Because Spanish will be their vehicle, whether they like it or not, and if we advance, the demand for knowledge of Catalan, Galician, and Basque will increase ... Just as we shall be collaborating with the *Instituto Camões*, giving them space for teaching Portuguese, as Europeans, as Iberians, how could we fail to be interested in collaborating with our neighbours? ... The Cervantes Institute will also help Native American languages as far as it can. Over the course of its history the world has lost too many cultural treasures to be able afford the luxury of losing further items from its linguistic heritage" ("Mientras el español, nuestra lengua franca, avanza, las otras lenguas y culturas del Estado avanzarán también. Porque el español va a ser su vehículo, lo quieran o no. Y si nosotros avanzamos, aumentará la demanda del conocimiento del catalán, gallego y vasco ... Igual que colaboraremos con el Instituto Camoens, cediéndoles nuestros espacios para que enseñen portugués: como europeos, como ibéricos, ¿cómo no nos va a interesar la colaboración con nuestros vecinos? ... El Cervantes ayudará también, en la medida de sus posibilidades a las lenguas indígenas americanas. El mundo a lo largo de su historia ha perdido demasiados tesoros culturales como para permitirse el lujo de perder algo más de su patrimonio lingüístico" [Molina qtd. in Tudela 66]). It is well known that this sort of idea is not shared by some social actors within the Iberian literary systems. Similarly, there would be voices to speak out against the entry into the Spanish system (not only in the canon, but at all levels in its repertoire) of "foreign" elements, for fear of a loss of hegemony or of core values. To this it may be replied that this is not so much a project or an idea, as it is a statement of what is a cultural necessity.

One need do no more than recall the diachronic semiotic processes currently in progress and that will remain present in the future. Literature, as Lotman pointed out, avoids sclerosis by renewing the aesthetic and ideological presuppositions that create elements in its "repertoire". As a cultural system, literature is a mechanism that always organizes itself, both in its origins and early struggles to exist, and when it has already become definitively consolidated. A glimpse at Spanish literature and the successive moments in time that shaped it may aid in understanding this. Its current form can be traced from its first systematization by Alphonso X in the twelfth century through the imperial literature of the Renaissance in the sixteenth and to Spain's crisis in 1898 — with the pressure from peripheral literatures that were then emerging, solved through the consolidation of Spanish philology on the basis of the work of Ramón Menéndez Pidal and his followers — and down to the cultural reconstruction undertaken by national Catholicism in the period after the Civil War won by Franco, who strove to suppress all traces of the exoteric.

Literary systems organize themselves in order to ensure their survival and one of the mechanisms for self-organization that literatures possess is the ordering of texts by means of value judgements into three strata. These are the high, the low, and the neutral sphere, to use the sort of topological description of systemic studies adopted from Iurii Tynianov onwards. In response to the question as to how this organization occurs, Lotman argued that it was through metatexts generated at the highest

level. For him, these included norms, rules, theoretical treatises, and critical articles that hand literature back to itself, but now in an organized, well constructed, and evaluated fashion (see Lotman). These metatexts may be integrated into creative literature itself. A recent example in Spanish literature would be the group of metatexts especially intended to bring about a review of value judgments on the linguistic and historic-cultural plane, produced by authors like José Manuel de Prada, Andrés Trapiello, and Javier Cercas, among others. These may be seen as following an earlier, indeed a well established, trend, relative to which the names of Francisco Umbral or Fernando Sánchez Dragó might be cited. All of these coincide in championing a revision of Spanish culture, raising some figures and lowering others, in a rereading of the canon from postmodern conservative positions. Their equivalent in linguistic metatexts would be the work of Juan R. Lodaes who has the opposite view to that of Molina:

Faced with this process of linguistic internationalization we have been persisting for the last 25 years with a process of the opposite kind: a process of regionalization. This process is inspired, in particular, by ideologists close to nationalism or independence movements, although they have met with a favourable response outside these movements and, what is the most paradoxical thing of all, among a left wing that because of its internationalist tendencies has traditionally been a defender of the "ideology of big languages." My view is very simple: Spain is not a multilingual country, but rather one with a "language community" ... and multilingualism cannot progress without undoing the network of human mobility, economic, commercial, communication, and goods transport links that has been built up around what we call Spanish. The word Spanish designates a language, of course, but Spanish is also a material of an economic sort which, thanks to being shared, generates a percentage of our GDP similar to that produced by tourism. (12)

It is more complicated to analyze the factors intervening in the Spanish literary system than, say, the Galician, where the production of metatexts has even led to an interweaving of creation and theory. For instance, the novelist Xosé C. Caneiro both theorizes and practices creative activities against what he calls "Kleenex literature." Within Spanish, something similar occurs by the group mentioned above, led by J. Manuel de Prada. This might also be said of the followers of E. Vila-Matas, who set themselves up as favoring irony as a weapon against popular novels. Nevertheless, it must be reiterated that this is more transparent in a smaller and more cohesive system, such as the Galician, than in the Spanish, where stratification determined by circles of power or media pressure can be observed. These pressures are present in Galicia too, but they are more evident, since the undergrowth is less thick.

What is clear is that there is a proliferation of meta-texts about self-awareness of the system in Galicia and to a lesser degree in Catalonia. The reasons for this are evident, at least in so far as the Galician system is concerned. Until not long ago it was in the phase of institutional consolidation and it has only recently gone from "literary nationalism to national literature" (see González-Millán). On the creative side one can point to authors such as Suso de Toro or Manuel Rivas, whose theoretical pronouncements and stance in defence of Galician literature have not been eroded by the fact that they are now borne along by the whirlwind of inter-systemic fame. Once more, it is from mediation outside their own system that the fact that these authors belong to the Galician literary system tends to be glossed over with a view to absorbing them into the dominant culture. As on so many previous occasions, once again Spanish critics received the most recent novel by Manuel Rivas as if Galician literature did not exist. When in 2006 Jordi Gracia wrote in *El País* a review of *Os libros arden mal* — a work about the Spanish Civil War set in his own native city — he does not indicate that the novel had been written in Galician half a year earlier and that what he is commenting upon is a translation into Castilian. In Catalonia, the situation is somewhat similar, although roles are perhaps more widely spread (see, e.g., Puntí), even if there are people who wear several hats at the same time. In Basque there is also a considerable level of metatext generation, at the hands of scholars well versed in systems theories, such as Jon Kortázar.

In conclusion, it would seem appropriate that such a ferment of ideas and theoretical and creative work in these literatures deserves to be better known in the whole of Spain. Those who participate in the shared culture from their own culture amount to some forty percent, so that they might now be described clearly as "minoritized" more than as a minority. It is for this reason that my present study is intended to generate a dialogue of *rapprochement*.



Note: The above article is a revised and translated version of Olivia Rodríguez González, "Canon y literaturas minorizadas. Las letras catalanas y gallegas en el sistema hispánico y su proyección en el canon europeo (I)," *1616* 11 (2006): 169-77. Copyright release to the author.

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