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Hispanic Language and Literature in the United States: Three Decisive Moments

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Topic: Academic Relation between Spain and the United States

Abstract: Academic relations are an especially significant chapter in modern relations between Spain and the United States. This report illustrates how these relations occurred since the nineteenth century by presenting three situations of special significance to Harvard University.

Key words: Harvard University, Hispanism, Spanish Literature, United States

In the history of modern relations between Spain and the United States there is a particularly significant chapter, one that is symptomatic: I am referring

to the chapter of academic relations; that is, the presence of Spain —its culture in general, but particularly its literature—in the curriculum of American universities. I qualify this chapter as symptomatic because it is not possible to consider it separately; whatever happens in the University is the result or the immediate projection of economic, political and social phenomena that occur far from campus. At the same time, it is a history that, strangely enough, has always more to do with Latin America than with Spain.

In this case, I think that the best way to summarize the history of the academic relations and the phenomena determining them is to reflect on its three decisive moments. The first one takes place around 1815-1816: Abiel Smith, a former Harvard student who had become a wealthy businessman in the textile industry, left at his death what was then an exorbitant amount of money, \$20,000, to endow a “Chair in French and Spanish Language and Culture” at his *alma mater*. It would be the first chair of its kind in the country. In 1816, George Ticknor, a well-known gentleman of Boston’s upper class, would become the first Smith Chair. This event raises a number of questions that reveal its long historical projection. For example: Why such a financial provision at that precise moment? Abiel Smith was a shrewd businessman that, like many others in the United States, immediately perceived that the independence of the South American colonies opened a number of new markets for American trade. In 1926, Longfellow’s father summed up the situation in a letter to his son, who was already preparing himself to be the successor of Professor Ticknor in the Smith Chair: “Such are the relations now existing between this country and Spanish America that a knowledge of the Spanish is quite as important as French. If you neglect either of these languages, you may be sure of not obtaining the station which you have in view.” Years later, James R. Lowell, the third holder of the Smith Chair, bluntly declared: “When at last a chair of French and Spanish was established, it was rather with an eye to commerce than to culture.”

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But these predictable explanations do not quite clear up two of the unknowns in this strange founding moment. First, the alleged symbiosis of French and Spanish in one Chair and one professor: Did one culture dominate over the other or were they balanced in a reasonable way? Second, the apparent lack of distinction between Spain and Hispanic America: Were they exclusively interested in Latin America or would the Peninsula play some role in the new academic project? It turns out that in this historical context, France still represented the culture *par excellence* (and specifically the culture of the Enlightenment, which was absorbed and broadcasted by personalities as decisive as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson), but unexpectedly, what made Ticknor special and would set the tone for the Smith Chair from the beginning, was not his interest in French but instead his primary dedication to Spanish. Ticknor's literature classes led to the publication of a monumental history of Spanish literature in three volumes, which appeared in 1849. Nothing of this magnitude was done for French. Now, did Ticknor write only a history of Spanish literature or did he also include Latin American literature? The Smith Chair had been created in response to the interest raised by Latin America, but the successive holders of the Chair understood that their preparation, both in language and in culture, should be carried out in Spain and not in Latin America. When Ticknor was offered the Chair, he immediately moved to Spain and spent two years in the country to improve his command of the language, and started reading and collecting a massive amount of books that he would later use both in his classes and in his famous history of Spanish literature.

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Longfellow received in Paris the letter from his father and immediately embarked on a long journey to Spain. Lowell ended up as an ambassador in Madrid. Why? Edith Hellman believes that at that time there was not a clear distinction between Spanish and Latin American cultures, so the language was learnt particularly through the works of Spanish classic writers. In 1916, Federico de Onís offered a more convincing answer: Latin American Literature was too new in a context in which literary studies valued more the consecrated classics;

furthermore, that literature was “American”, whereas only the European cultural monuments were generally perceived as truly prestigious. Moreover, as Edward Hale wrote in 1926 (perhaps thinking about Washington Irving), “in America in the nineteenth century, the country of romance—perhaps *the* country of romance—was Spain,” even if it was not completely granted the same cultural preeminence as other European countries. In any case, the fact is that over the next hundred years no Latin American literary history was published in the United States, whereas histories of Spanish literature, almost all of them carried out by of the heirs of Ticknor, multiplied. None of them mentioned more than two or, at most, three South American writers —the Inca Garcilaso, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and at best, Andrés Bello—, and all three of them appeared on the second or third tier, as mere epigones of the Spanish writers. Ticknor, for example, wrote that the Inca Garcilaso (son of a Spaniard and an Inca) was “a gentle and trusting spirit rather than a wise one [...], always betraying the weaker nature of his mother”; for him, Sor Juana Inés was “a remarkable woman, although not a remarkable poet”.

The status of Spanish language cultures in U.S. universities continued in this vein until a new decisive moment was reached, and with a significant twist. Occurring in the first week of August 1914, it was ignited, on the one hand, by the opening of the Panama Canal on August 5th and, on the other, by the German declaration of war (of what would later be known as World War I) between the first and the fourth days of the same month. Another Harvard alumnus, Alfred Coester —who two years later would publish the first history of Latin American literature to appear in the United States— wrote at the time “the building of the Panamá Canal has directed our attention to the South. We have discovered that those vast unknown regions are inhabited by human beings worthy of being better known though their character differ widely from our own.” At the same time, the German invasion of Belgium (just the day before the Canal’s inauguration), created a situation where, for the new academic year, most of the extremely popular German courses offered by American high-schools and

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universities became empty. The vast majority of this huge student population opted for Spanish, especially when they realized that trade relations between Europe and the United States were halted, and that a large-scale commercial trade between the United States and South America was now possible. What seemed to continue without major changes was that Americans still considered it necessary to detour through Spain in order to get to the heart of Latin America. In 1920, Federico de Onís –who had arrived from Spain in 1916, sent by Don Ramón Menéndez Pidal to be the intellectual leader of the new boom of Spanish from the Chair of Columbia University—recalls: “Then [1914] the craving to learn Spanish, and everything related to the countries where Spanish was spoken, began to develop as a collective fever. Spanish was the instrument to deal with them and to trade with them. But trade, if it is done well, is a difficult activity: it is not enough to know the language; you need to know the men who speak it, their tastes, their character, their customs, their psychology, their ideals; in order to succeed you need to know their history, their geography, their literature, and their art. The Spanish American peoples are children of Spain: therefore, you need to go to the source and get to know Spain. The North American mind is capable of this detour when it seriously prepares for action”.

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Something, however, had begun to change irreversibly. In 1898 Spain had lost the war against the United States and, with it, a part of its cultural preeminence over Latin America, as the North American prejudice understood it. In this context, Alfred Coester –advised and encouraged by Jeremiah Ford, his fellow student at Harvard and soon fourth holder of the Smith Chair— writes and publishes in 1916 *The Literary History of Spanish America*, a pioneering 500-page manual, which underwent several editions, the last of them in 1965. The novelty and success of that history earned him a Chair in Spanish at the University of Stanford in 1920. Coester’s *History* is, above all, a symptom of the irreversible shift from the Spanish culture towards the Spanish American culture, a shift that started to be evident throughout the entire country, particularly in the university arena. On one hand, Coester still obeys the criteria on the subject that

Menéndez y Pelayo and Father Blanco, among others, imposed from Spain; on the other, the, at that time, new phenomenon of Latin American modernism allowed him to distance himself from those criteria and to emphasize the independence and literary maturity of Latin America. In the preface to his *History*, Coester writes: “The judgment which one renders on the value of Spanish-American literature depends entirely on the point of view with which the critic approaches its study. If he considers it a branch or sub-order of Spanish Literature, he will reach conclusions similar to those of the late Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo, in his *Historia de la poesía hispano-americana*. To him as a Spaniard the exuberance of American patriotic verse is not only detestable but bad literature. To his mind, only those productions have worth which approximate the standard set by Spanish classics”; Coester allowed himself to disagree, at least in regard to Modernism. As J.B. Trend would write a few years later, in the preface to an Anthology of Spanish verse: “The truth is that, since the time of Rubén Darío, it has been impossible to leave out Spanish America.” About Darío, Coester commented: “this talented poet absorbed tendencies and methods and welded them into a product of his own.” Meanwhile, the existing documentation shows that American universities and especially Harvard, under the direction of Ford, were paying more attention to Latin American literature, largely because Modernism was seen as its entrance into adulthood, and the most important manifestation of its intellectual independence from Spain. In the preface to the first history of Modernism, written by another student of his, Isaac Goldberg, and published in 1920, Jeremiah Ford recognizes that Latin American Modernism “showed that the American children had something of value and of their own contrivance to bring back to the Iberian mother [...]. It is high time that we rouse ourselves to a sense of our backwardness in the case.” Goldberg, more analytical than Coester, writes enthusiastically about Darío: “he can be compared not only to the greatest poets who have written in the Spanish language, but also to the masters of universal poetry.” To understand the audacity of this praise, it should be borne in mind that the majority of North Americans interested in Latin

American culture, including Jeremiah Ford, had not forgiven Darío for his “Ode to Roosevelt” written in 1905.

The third decisive moment on this path is, in large part, the ultimate consequence of this shift or change in direction. We can also provide an approximate date, certainly between the 60’s and the 70’s; that is, when the Cuban revolution has already consolidated, Che Guevara becomes an icon of May ‘68 and the famous *Boom* of Latin American literature (mostly in narrative) obtains not only considerable commercial success in the United States, but also an academic projection similar to the one that Modernism had previously achieved (mostly in poetry). But it will be, however, a more prolonged phenomenon: since the early 20’s, —or perhaps since 1916, when the Dominican Pedro Henríquez Ureña obtained a Chair at the University of Minnesota—American universities increasingly disseminated Latin American literature through courses and publications. At Columbia University, for example, Federico de Onís published in 1934 his influential *Antología de la Poesía Española e Hispanoamericana*, in which he decisively amended the criteria set by Menéndez y Pelayo. At the University of California at Berkeley, the Chilean professor Arturo Torres Rioseco — graduated from Minnesota, appointed assistant professor in 1928 and tenured in 1936— claimed with an increasing intensity an independent space for Latin American Literature. Two of his books gave unequivocal legitimacy to this claim: his *Antología de la literatura hispanoamericana* of 1939 and his famous *The New World Literature. Tradition and Revolt in Latin America*, 1949. In Harvard, meanwhile, an “Harvard Council on Hispano-American Studies”, founded by Jeremiah Ford, was operating since the late 20’s, and published an annual volume entitled *Hispano-American Literature in the United States. A Bibliography of Translations and Criticism*. In 1940, Harvard invited Henríquez Ureña to deliver the prestigious *Elliott Norton Lectures* (Stravinsky had the honor the previous year and Panofsky the following one). In these academic lectures, published by the university in 1945, the Dominican professor amends the blunders and omissions that had hitherto been propagated in North American classrooms, including Ford’s. But it would be only during the 60’s and 70’s that North

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American universities would catch up with the rest of America: in 1965, Enrique Anderson Imbert, Henríquez Ureña's disciple, held the first Chair in Latin American Literature at Harvard; Borges in 1968 and Octavio Paz in 1970 delivered the *Elliot Norton Lectures*, (and, so far, only one Spaniard, Jorge Guillén, in 1958). From that point, the displacement process of Spanish literature by Latin American literature accelerates. The difference with the other decisive moments is that, at this time, on the one hand, Spanish culture was deeply overshadowed by Franco's dictatorship, and on the other, Spanish American culture and literature no longer were seen in a context of commercial and economic objectives; rather they seemed to be identified, at least at first glance, with the counterculture of '68 and with the leftist movements that opposed the Nixon and Regan presidencies. Consider this as a symptom: *Cien años de soledad* was published in Spanish in 1967, it was translated into English in 1970, and it immediately became required reading in all departments of Spanish; its author, however, was declared *persona non grata* by the United States, and remained so until Bill Clinton lifted the ban in the 90's.

Between the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the 21st century this trend has acquired greater strength and novel tints. In major departments of Romance languages and literatures of the United States, the Spanish sections are quantitatively the largest ones, followed at a distance—a numeric, not an intellectual distance—by the French sections. Within the sections devoted to Spanish, both interests and numbers speak in favor of Latin American literature and culture. Let me present here, to conclude, just an example: in 1988, the Spanish section of Harvard University had two professors of Latin American literature, a Tenured Professor and an Assistant Professor, and also had two professors of contemporary Peninsular literature, one of them teaching Spanish medieval literature and the other teaching Golden Age. In 2008, in the same section, there were five teachers of Latin American literature, devoted to all the historical and geographical areas of the field—from the Southern Cone to the Caribbean, and from colonial to contemporary literature— a number clearly

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insufficient to serve adequately all the students interested in the subject. In those two decades other academic specialties have emerged and consolidated, not only multiplying the Latin American subjects to be offered, but also blurring or modifying the old disciplinary and departmental boundaries, so characteristic of the traditional university: “Transatlantic Studies” and “Latino Studies” are perhaps the most representative. And so the story continues.

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