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Frictions of World Literature

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1

Subject: Study of World Literature from Spanish and Latin American contexts and literatures.

Overview: Report on the seminar “Frictions of World Literature: Taste, Value, and the Academy in Spanish and Latin American Literatures and Contexts,” celebrated at Harvard University.

Key words: World Literature, Spain, Latin America, aesthetics, comparative literature, comparativism

Introduction

This report addresses literary and academic exchanges from the perspective of so-called World Literature. That is, an approach that problematizes these

exchanges by focusing on the ways in which cultural products—in this case literary— transform themselves into other products without losing their value, their interest, or their meaning in the process. By exploring how some Hispanic texts and authors travel to other contexts, and how Spanish-speaking contexts receive external texts, we can better fathom the aspects of literature that are more difficult to transfer, and which therefore lose their original meaning and form in order to transform into something other, adapted to the new context. I will refer to these problematic aspects as “frictions of World Literature.”

The focus on the reader, an interest in how we read, or in the reception of texts in general, developed in the 1970s and 1980s out of a broadening of literary studies as a result of which the text could no longer be considered as a decontextualized object. This interest aimed at breaking with the formalist perspective, and with what was called “close reading” of words in the text (Jauss 1982; Iser 1974; Rabinowitz 1987). This broadening of interest to encompass the reader alongside the text was paralleled by a growing interest in the cultural contexts of the production and reception of literary texts. In the wake of this interest in the reading and the reception of texts, followed a new emphasis on translation, which critics no longer saw as simply the traducing of a text from one language to another, recognizing that something essential was lost in the process. These critics were beginning to think of translation as a mode of reading and producing that merited serious attention, and that transformed a given text

2

into something else, revealing a great deal about how we think, and ways in which we are conditioned by our cultural and life experiences (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990; Venuti 2004).

Nevertheless, in paying close attention to translation and to its cultural implications, critics of translation studies overlooked a broader perspective, which would compare texts and contexts at a grater scale, and which would virtually transcend the original text in order to consider the lives of texts on the other side of their journey to other contexts. World Literature emerged in the 1990s out of translation studies, and adopted this new perspective. Authors such as David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, Martin Puchner, or Mariano Siskind, each from their own particular viewpoint, argued for the need to attend to the ways in which contexts receive texts external to them, and the ways in which itineraries constantly change the texts. Texts change or acquire new meanings as a result of new interpretations, sometimes even due to mistakes or alterations that are imperceptible to readers but which turn out to be key in the development of reinterpretations (Damrosch 2003; Moretti 2013; Casanova 1999; Siskind 2014).

This approach to literature raises at least one major question, which we have not sufficiently reflected upon: What are the truly problematic aspects of this

“wayfaring” of literary texts? What are the values that we attach to a literary text that might condition its reception? What is that essential element of the context of production, or what is so intrinsic to a language, that might explain why in the course of transmission to other contexts and languages, a text undergoes such profound changes, or is received so differently? While these changes affect literary texts, the question extends to literary criticism and the Academy: How do academic exchanges responsible for literary criticism work at an international level? Furthermore, how do these changes work in literature in Spanish when it travels abroad, and in the literatures written in languages other than Spanish when they travel to the Spanish and Latin American contexts?

There are three main issues that may help structure our exploration of frictions of World Literature: the working of literary markets, problems derived from aesthetic aspects of the texts, and academic exchanges. By analyzing each of these questions in turn, we are able to identify specific transformations in literature and criticism between the context of origin and that of reception, generating what we may call “misunderstandings” or, taking a different view, rewritings or rereadings of the texts.

Markets and cultural values

Markets play a major role in the reception of texts. There are many reasons that might explain the uneven reception of particular texts in different markets, or varying degrees of interest in their publication. One of the most influential factors in literary markets is their capacity to assign a national origin to a specific literary text. This would explain why many bestsellers are promoted for their local color, an attitude that Edward Said famously labeled as “orientalist” (Said 1979). The local component of texts is of major significance for their readings in the context of production, as well as for their classification as belonging to, or being representative of, a specific place. Generally speaking, although it might not always seem this way, the question of provenance remains central to many promotional campaigns for works of literature in a globalized world that nonetheless maintains a stubborn attachment to national identifications. The marketing of the literature of the famous Latin American *boom*, for example, relied heavily on these local identifications. The appropriation of what was sold as “magic realism” in Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* (*A Hundred Years of Solitude*), thus facilitated the penetration of other national markets with what became a generic Latin American hallmark, a literary strategy that Isabel Allende adopted with great success. An early review of *Cien años de soledad* closed an otherwise excellent analysis by concluding that the novel “is a South American Genesis, an earthy piece of enchantment, more, as the narrator says of Macondo, ‘an intricate stew of truth and mirages’” (Kiely 1970). While this was a

5

case of successful entry and enthusiastic reception in markets that wished to export and import products that might be recognizable as Latin American literature —where, as Gonzalo Aguilar points out, the concept of continental identity was a substitute for that of national identity— there are other, failed cases that denote the problems entailed in the attribution of such labels by the market.

In a seminar dedicated to the topic that is the subject of this report, held at Harvard University in May 2015, “Frictions of World Literature: Taste, Value, and the Academy in Spanish and Latin American contexts and literatures,” Gonzalo Aguilar addressed the problem of writers who are out of place in a market that holds onto national ideals and whose work is consequently read as “foreign” everywhere. The case of Clarice Lispector clearly demonstrates some of the frictions of markets in their literary transactions.

As Aguilar explained, the *boom* attempted to export Clarice Lispector as part of a group of authors that helped consolidate the “Latin America” label. At the beginning of the 70s, Editorial Sudamericana, which had published *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, also published the Spanish translations of *An Apprenticeship, or the Book of Delights*, *Family Ties*, *The Apple in the Dark* and *The Stream of Life*. Nonetheless, Lispector was soon relegated to a marginal position. Her scarcely noted appearance at the Buenos Aires Book Fair in 1976 indicates the

negligible impression that her work had made on that group of Latin American writers. Aguilar argued that it was precisely the perceived lack of local character in her work that impeded her inclusion among the writers of the *Boom*.

Clarice Lispector was born in Ukraine but grew up and lived in Brazil from the age of two, a biographical detail that, along with her physical appearance and her accent when speaking Portuguese, apparently justified the attribution of the label “foreign” with which the author profoundly disagreed. Since Lispector never gave a national character to her literature, and she never included references to an explicitly Brazilian geography, or allegories of Brazil that would have made her works exportable as emblematic of Brazilian literature, critics considered her work foreign and did not include her in the Brazilian literary canon. In addition, since she eschewed both the avant-garde cosmopolitan Brazilian novel, as well as the trends of the social novel, the difficulties involved in placing her within the Brazilian canon were obvious. Yet she did not consider herself any less Brazilian for the exclusion. As Aguilar explained, the neglect that she experienced in her own country, which always considered her a foreigner, hindered the dissemination of her literature in the promotion campaign of the *boom*, and much later problematized her place in World Literature which, in their aim to give coverage to all the literatures of the world, have to various degrees depended on national literatures as a point of reference. While Lispector had a broader reception from the 70s on thanks to a reading within women’s literature, the

7

peculiar reception of her work reveals the vagaries of reception and the spaces that obstruct the reception of literary works within the dynamics of global markets.

What happens when the markets or the criticism contributing to their functioning is not able to classify a literary work because it does not fit the national parameters on which its export mostly depends? The example of Lispector reveals local character as a space of friction in world literature. The space in which her literature is situated is a no-place that also holds writers like Gombrowicz, Navokov, or Tomás Segovia —a case that Daniel Aguirre Oteiza explored— in a sort of limbo of difficult ascription. Their works challenge the preconceptions of national markets, and the value of national ascription for imports and exports. They live in a world beyond citizenship that sometimes even bars them from international circuits because these are in fact still largely based on national configurations.

8

Aesthetic and political languages

The frictions that complicate the itineraries of texts do not only affect travel routes, but they also concern the travelers. How do the aesthetic aspects of texts

affect literary exchanges? For several decades, translation studies have helped critics think about translation as a social and cultural phenomenon, and have enabled us to move away from seeing translation as either the “betrayal” or simple “mediation” of texts, and to think of it in terms of creation. In this sense, the so-called “translation turn” drew attention to aesthetic, technical aspects of literary texts in a multidisciplinary perspective, from which, among other things, the concept of World Literature also emerged. My question, therefore, addresses the challenges that the aesthetic features of a text –which are linguistic and cultural– pose to translation, and beyond, to the reception of translated texts.

The challenge of translating dialect helps us reflect on literary exchanges from the perspective of aesthetic values. There are a number of pertinent cases we might examine. In the aforementioned seminar, Annalisa Mirizio explored the problem of dialect in the novels of Paolo Pasolini, and I addressed the same problem in African American novels, which I will focus on in this article. In particular, I will address the recent translations of the African American authors Charles Chesnutt, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jean Toomer, published in Spain by Señor Lobo and Ediciones del Oriente y del Mediterráneo (who publish the series Biblioteca Afroamericana de Madrid), the Editorial Baile del Sol and Lumen. The editorial decisions to suppress dialect entirely, to render it as a Spanish regional dialect, or to reduce it to a minimum, relying on an apparatus of footnotes and contextual prefaces or epilogues, reveal one of the most obvious frictions with

9

regard to the aesthetic aspects of literature. How do we translate a text whose aesthetic value is mostly based on playing with dialect, benefiting from all the cultural connotations and the debates it has been subjected to in its own literary tradition?

US literature has been creating a “black” or “African American” dialect or vernacular since the end of the 19th century, from both sides of the ideological spectrum, ranging from Thomas Dixon’s discriminatory or racist perspective, through Mark Twain and William Faulkner’s ambivalence, to Zora Neale Hurston’s defense of one’s own language. From the very beginning there has been a heated debate in the US over the ideological implications of using black dialect in literature, with criticism directed at authors such as Charles Chesnutt or Paul Dunbar, accused of representing African Americans in line with white racist parameters. In the 20s these critics turned on a new group of authors, members of the so-called Harlem Renaissance, including Sterling Brown, Jean Toomer, and above all Zora Neale Hurston. This criticism considered that writing in dialect in literature meant perpetuating the stereotype of an uneducated African American, incapable of expressing himself in a formally correct manner. This was far from being merely a question of verbal pedantry, since the underlying implications were used to justify racial segregation, and the denial of rights, including the right to vote. In that sense, “black dialect” became an extremely sensitive point in the development of African American literature. By the end of the 20th century, views

10

on the use of dialect by these authors had changed dramatically from the time of their original reception. Black vernacular appears in these authors as a use of language that benefits from the properties of its relation with popular culture and the metalinguistic uses of the latter in dialect (Baker 1984; Sundquist 1992). As Henry Louis Gates argued in *The Signifying Monkey*, black dialect is a linguistic form that plays with dialogue by building a succession of sentences, each one more adroit and quick-witted than the other, constantly reformulating texts and popular sayings. This mode of speech is based on indirect statements, the ambiguities of metaphor, an openness to diverse interpretations, and a double voice that says something but might also be saying the contrary. Black vernacular is considered autochthonous to the US, developed by African Americans drawing on a long popular tradition with African roots, mostly Yoruba religious imaginary. As a result of its distinct features described above, black dialect is an essentially ironic way of speaking (Gates 1988).

11

While the almost complete suppression of dialect in the translations of *La frontera del color* [a surprising choice for the translated title of *The Wife of his Youth and other Stories* (1899)] slightly alters the original text in its Spanish translation, others like *Caña* [translation of *Cane* (1923)] by Jean Toomer and *Sus ojos miraban a Dios* [translation of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)] by Zora Neale Hurston, are profoundly changed, irrespective of the editors' decision regarding the translation of dialect. This is because the aesthetic scheme of the

last two novels relies on the dialect itself. What makes these novels Modernist—in the Anglo-Saxon sense of experimental—is that they explore the problem of the limits of language, which they address by means of dialect in its reflections on language itself, and its indirect and enigmatic nature.

Indeed, the stories do not make sense if they cannot be perceived through the prism of the indirect discourse of black dialect, which constantly reminds the reader that the representation of stories and people is fallible and elusive. Dialect foregrounds a double voice, that speaks to two audiences at once —black and white— and that obliges the reader to assume two points of view simultaneously, at least every time that standard English and African American dialect alternate. The double voiced texts have a long tradition in African American literature, a feature that Du Bois called “double consciousness,” which this extraordinarily influential author in the formation of an African American identity and struggle described in the following words: “a sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others... One ever feels his twoness —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” (Du Bois 1996). These novels elaborate a double narrative form, one that expresses the double perspective that is a product of racial oppression.

12

African American literature has been scarcely translated in Spain over the past few decades. Iker Seisdedos pointed this out some time ago in a review of the translation of David Levering Lewis', *Cuando Harlem estaba de moda* [*When Harlem Was in Vogue*, published in 1981] in the newspaper *El País*. Mireia Sentís also highlighted the omission in her book *En el pico del águila* which, she says, “was born of the perplexity before the fact that Europe, which one way or another hangs on everything said or done on the New Continent, almost completely ignores what is perhaps its most genuine culture. Who [in Spain or Europe] really knows anything of African American history, literature, and thought?” (Sentís 1998). This concern led to the creation of a collection dedicated to African American literature in the *Biblioteca Afroamericana de Madrid*, which “through all the genres, from autobiography to essay, and through all the historical periods, from slavery up to our own times... aims to present a culture marked by the internal boundary of the color line, and by an unceasing struggle for equality” (Toomer 2014). The great cultural and political interest that African American literature has lately aroused in Spain is due to an affinity with the founding objective of this literary tradition, that of finding a collective identity that would overcome intense discrimination, and would inspire a struggle for Civil Rights (Warren 2011). Because of this, the translation of canonical texts that use black dialect as a formal aesthetic instrument to express this political and cultural context is necessarily a decision between content and form, a historicizing of texts that needs to shed their aesthetics, or in other words, their own expression

of their politics. Ultimately, their translation has to sacrifice the politics of their literary form. The texts reach Spain having retained their cultural and political value, but they are transformed en route into more conventional texts, because they suppress or profoundly alter the play with dialect, with all its attendant connotations, which is precisely what had made them experimental texts belonging to what Michael North named “the dialect of Modernism” (North 1994). Therefore, as readers, we receive the text in Spanish for its political contribution rather than for the aesthetic that makes it a work of art.

Translation of dialect in texts where this is a fundamental aesthetic component, therefore, is one example of the problems that texts encounter in their travels, which forces them to mutate profoundly and to become another text, regardless of editorial decisions. This space of aesthetic negotiation and of new translations conduce to different readings in new contexts –new readings in this case facilitated by cultural aims that are consonant with the problems of contemporary Spain, a context where many identify with the struggle for equality, and there is an acknowledged need for forms and ways of facing up to emerging racial stereotypes.

14

Academic exchanges

Literary criticism is a field of study that, from within universities and similar institutions, is concerned with not only interpreting but also evaluating literary texts. Literary criticism is a key agent in the circulation of texts, as we have seen in the case of Clarice Lispector. Critical texts encounter similar obstacles because, like literary texts, criticism also circulates —through conferences, publications, translations, and diverse production and reception contexts. Indeed, academic exchanges, which read and often determine how texts are to be read, also face complications, generating what Nora Catelli termed, in reference to Comparative Literature studies, the “misunderstandings of comparativism.”

Just as misunderstandings produced in exchanges frequently affect any history of literature, they affect the history of criticism as well. Misunderstandings are frequently transferred to the history of criticism. In other words, if in a given time and place a text receives a particular interpretation, this might become the dominant one in the history of the discipline, while other no less important discussions generated in other contexts might fall by the wayside. In this sense, the circulation problems of criticism profoundly affect not only literary texts — those that get published, read, and taught— but they also affect criticism itself. These problems of circulation are another friction of World Literature.

15

Returning to the “misunderstandings of comparativism,” in the seminar “Frictions of World Literature: Taste, Value, and the Academy,” Nora Catelli observed that relations between centers and peripheries were often an impediment to dialogue within Comparative Literature. Centers and peripheries greatly determine the impact of critical texts in one place or another, and their derived misunderstandings. Catelli provided two clear examples of the marginality of Hispanic countries in the critical landscape of Comparative Literature, and the resulting differences in the reception of critical texts. These examples included one case of the obstacles faced by Spanish and Latin American criticism in the US academy, on the one hand, and two cases of negative or even hostile reception of critical texts written in the centers of comparativism and received in Spanish and Latin American peripheral contexts, on the other.

16

The national origin of literary critics, like that of literary authors, is often an impediment even to the mere opportunity for dialogue. Catelli used the case study of the reception of the great Argentinean critic María Rosa Lida, in her discussion with Ernst Robert Curtius and Gilbert Highet in reference to their respective books, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, and *The Classical Tradition*. Even when working from within the US academic system, Lida’s long essays, “Endurance of ancient literature in the West (On Ernst Robert Curtius’ *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*)” (1951/2) and “The classical tradition in Spain” (1951), barely received any acknowledgement from

the authors to whom the argument was directed, so she was denied any real opportunity for dialogue on equal terms.

In the case of critical texts emanating from the US that have been central to Comparative literature, their reception is varied and often contradictory. For instance, René Wellek's essay, "The crisis of Comparative Literature" (1958), now canonized in the history of comparative literature, had little impact in Argentina. This essay did not make much of an impression because of the structure of university departments, which were designated as comparative literature departments, rather than divided into national languages and literatures. An essay arguing that literary comparativism was in crisis was hardly convincing in that context, so the essay generated little critical response in Argentina (Vega Ramos and Carbonell 1998).

17

Something almost opposite occurred with the study of literary criticism edited by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism & the Sciences of Man* and published in 1970 as a result of a seminar organized in Baltimore in 1966, attended by several well-known structuralist critics and their early detractors, aside from the mentioned editors, as well as other now famous critics such as Derrida, Paul de Man, or Hillis Miller. In Spain, Barral Editores immediately translated the volume, which was published

as *Los lenguajes críticos y las ciencias del hombre. Controversia estructuralista* (Macksey, Donato, and Llorca 1972). Among other reasons, the fact that other texts by authors contributing to the volume had been translated into Spanish prior to the publication of *The Structuralist Controversy*, generated a reading that was not only more contextualized and engaged, but also much more generous than in France, where the proceedings of the seminar were never published as a collected volume. Catelli argues that in Latin American countries the ground was already prepared for that particular discussion, especially in the Argentinean context, which was predisposed to absorb and extend it. The reception of *The Structuralist Controversy* was much more fecund in Argentina than in other contexts.

18

If critical discussions do not follow the same paths in peripheral contexts such as the Spanish and Latin American, it is not because these are backward in relation to central critical perspectives, or less productive, but because discussions occur in different chronologies and contexts. In absorbing a great deal of material from the centers, these other chronologies and contexts welcome, integrate, and expand some of these perspectives, even when they are prematurely considered obsolete in their original, central contexts.

These examples, as Catelli suggested, make us reflect on the elaboration of single chronologies and spaces —one chronology, a limited number of centers— as frictions of World Literature. Single chronologies and spaces have the effect of narrowing the critical landscape, limiting the range of meanings —an avoidable crisis— or even obliterating them due to the scant attention they are given.

Conclusion

The frictions of World literature, therefore, are due to a number of distinct factors that affect the circulation of texts, and the form in which texts are received in contexts different from those that produced them. The spaces of friction, or the problematic issues, in the circulation of literature include the operation of markets, aesthetic features, and academic exchanges.

19

As we have seen in the cases of Clarice Lispector, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, María Rosa Lida, and René Wellek, the circulation of texts is replete with obstacles. In these cases, reception is problematic because texts are labeled with national identifications to facilitate their export and to satisfy the cosmopolitan desires of those new reception contexts; because they undergo aesthetic transformation in the course of translation, based on their potential to communicate what the new contexts seem to require at the time of reception; or because the chronology of conferences and seminars, or the structure of

academic institutions where contributing critics are based, are at variance with one another.

The frictions I have pointed out are obstacles that displace, condition, and change the reception of texts. This compels us to approach texts differently at the point of translation, or when deciding which texts are going to be included in a series or an anthology. These decisions sometimes result in unfortunate cases that may consign great authors to oblivion, or canonize others whose merits are scarcely greater. In a sense, spaces of friction reveal as highly problematic attempts in World Literature to select texts on the basis of a national tradition, or of canonizing some critical texts instead of others.

20

All cases of problematic circulation, however, offer us the opportunity to revise our criteria in reading and assessing international texts. As this article has demonstrated, the attendant problems condition our own reading of texts, which is subjective and contextual, and reveal the key function of translations and the creative space in which they intervene, bridging different languages and contexts and defining particular itineraries. Precisely because they reveal problems related to their circulation, the frictions of World Literature exert pressure in the direction of other potential paths of distribution and reception of texts. Since the texts demand very significant changes in their exportation, which affect markets, the

aesthetic features of the texts, as well as their potential for dialogue, the difficulties presented by the texts impose routes that are less straightforward. Through these efforts, texts and their readings branch out and recreate in order to reach new reception contexts. Ultimately, these frictions are spaces of negotiation and, therefore, spaces of creation. They are spaces of creation in the sense that they expand texts and literature, and, because they continue to point out the gaps between the original texts and their itinerant progeny, they reveal the means and the processes through which texts develop creatively. Because of this, we often encounter a strange sensation in our readings, something that for reasons unbeknownst generates a feeling of uncertainty, and that has its origins in the transformations of texts in the course of their travels. It ultimately reminds us that we are reading a text that is simultaneously one and many, the same and other, and that we interpret both what we receive from, and what we project onto, the texts we read.

21

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23