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NATIONAL IDENTITY IN LATIN-AMERICAN LITERATURE

I

If we admit that Latin-American literature is a part of what is called Western culture, why, I ask myself, has it not been able to influence any of the great literatures of the West, outside of the Spanish? To be more precise, when I speak of influencing, I am not referring to the historico-cultural event that signifies Latin America, which has changed the West, but specifically to literature, that is, writing, the book, the language, the contents, the creative structure and the symbols. From its origins until today, Latin-American literature, like Jugoslavian literature—in spite of the Nobel prize awarded to Ivo Andric—or Bulgarian or Icelandic, remains a marginal phenomenon. It is produced within a closed circuit, having no real resonance except in Spain. Furthermore, it struggles between two guilt feelings: one, that of being late with regard to renovating currents of fashions of the day and the other, that of not responding to its own reality. Because of those burdens of a guilty conscience, it often feigns innovation by following

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson

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outside models or exalting a nationalist realism that has not produced the slightest new form but only a mediocre art of propaganda. It simulates and copies, or it lags behind. It either tries to be up to date or pretends to overcome this uneasiness by inventing an intransigent Americanism, behaving like a telluric barbarian or accepting traditional popular forms that may produce works such as *Martín Fierro*, whose value for the Latin-Americans cannot be denied but whose range is limited.

The often-expressed desire to transpose its own ways of expression, its social, historic, geographic, linguistic and symbolic realities into a universal language and interest, so as to enter the international scene, has not been fulfilled except in a very restricted way. Literary creation in Latin America has not promoted movements nor judgments, nor had repercussions of an indisputable renewing force, like romanticism, symbolism, the esthetics of the end of the 19th century, dadaism, surrealism or structuralism. The new always comes from Europe and also, which wounds the Latin-American pride, from the United States. Andrés Bello's stock has no very high quotation internationally, be it said with no intention of nihilism. The sphere of influence of a Latinizing humanist such as José Enrique Rodó is circumscribed within our letters and at a time that is already somewhat nebulous, that of *modernismo*, a movement that although it influenced Spanish letters had no repercussion in Brazil and is hardly known except by European or American scholars in universities or in the teaching profession. Rubén Darío venerated Verlaine, his contemporary, but Verlaine did not know Darío even existed.

And Darío, who played a determining role in Latin-American literature, is still unknown in Europe or the United States outside the Spanish departments of universities. It is not the same for Poe, whose work impressed Baudelaire. Darío and Poe are both Americans, but while the first counts only for the Latin-Americans and the Spanish, the second represents a universal value that goes beyond the cadre of Western literature. Staying within the American context, it is undeniable that figures such as Franklin, Irving, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Emerson, Longfellow, Whitman or Twain have enjoyed a greater international reputation than Bello, Montalvo, Sarmiento, Mármol, Pombo, Isaacs, Hostos or Neruo. This is with respect to the 19th century.

As far as the 20th century is concerned, I do not see at present that the wind has turned in favor of Latin-American letters and thought, in spite of the novelistic “boom” and Nobel prizes awarded to Gabriela Mistral, Miguel Ángel Asturias, Pablo Neruda and Gabriel García Márquez. It is true that these authors have been translated into a number of languages, as have been Gallegos, Cortázar and some others, but we have to admit that they occupy a minor place and have awakened much less interest in critics and in the market than Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Miller, Dos Passos (in his day), Steinbeck, Faulkner, Pound, O’Neill, Tennessee Williams or Saroyan. I do not mention Eliot since he, like Henry James, felt more English than American. Nor do I mention Melville, the creator of the myth of *Moby Dick*, being a recently-discovered and esteemed author, although he was born in 1819 and died in 1891, that is, belonging to the 19th century and contemporary with forgotten Latin-American narrators such as the Chilean Alberto Blest Gana, influenced by Balzac; the Uruguayan Alejandro Magariños Cervantes, author of *Caramurú*, a serialized “gaucho” novel according to Anderson Imbert; the Mexican Vicente Riva Palacio; the Argentine Lucio Victoriano Mansilla. In Venezuela, José Heriberto García de Quevedo, who lived for many years in France and was present at the historic explosion of the Commune, was born in 1819, the same year as Herman Melville. He did not write a book like *Moby Dick*; only mediocre novellas such as *El amor de una niña*, *Dos duelos a diez y ocho años de distancia*, *Un amor de estudiante*, *El Castillo de Tancarville*, etc.

Melville, unrecognized in his day, published *Moby Dick* in 1851. The critics in his country did not understand the immense value of this book that transformed reality through a process of transmutation, itself the creator of an existential myth. Modern sensitivity has redeemed this author, recognizing in the white whale a symbol of the disorder and absurdity of the world, of terror before the absolute, and in Captain Ahab, the will to conquer the monster, to confront the unfettered subconscious. But this archetypal symbolism rests on a strange language which mixes the Biblical and the Evangelical with lyric splendor, and on personages of a singular and fascinating humanity. In spite of its obvious romantic source, it is a modern work because of its ambiguity, its structural and symbolic complexity and its hallucinating character.

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The sea becomes the kingdom of the unknown and the monstrous, and man confronts its mysteries. We can with propriety speak of a “magic realism” in the presence of this work, a magic realism which precedes by a century that of the Latin-Americans. In addition to the titles already given, we may mention these novels, contemporary with Melville’s work: *María*, by Jorge Isaacs, which it is better not to qualify, was published in 1867; *Amalia* by José Mármol, whose publication as a serial began the same year as the appearance of *Moby Dick*. But no one troubles himself with this *María* or this *Amalia*, except for the unfortunate students who have them in their program of study.

When José Enrique Rodó published his *Ariel* in 1900, a veiled condemnation of the North American materialistic world, a utilitarian democracy, mediocre and massive, lacking in Latin finesse, without ideals, so far from the thought of an Emerson or a Channing, he seemed to be unacquainted with the literature of the country. except for Poe, whom he must have read in the translation by Baudelaire. He seemed not to know authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, Henry James, the very popular James Fenimore Cooper and the monumental Walt Whitman. But perhaps the grossly democratic sense of the author of *Leaves of Grass*, so far removed from Latin and “Arielesque” refinement shocked the estheticism of Rodó and so he gave it no importance. But Rubén Darío did. The enthusiastic Darío who put Ariel’s message into verse, singing the “illustrious and prolific races, blood of fertile Hispania”, and opposing with rhetorical and nationalist emphasis the Latin-American Ariel to the Anglo-Saxon Caliban, in other words, indigenous and Latin idealism to the abject imperialist pragmatism of the Yankees. He threatens Theodore Roosevelt, the fierce hunter, reminding him that “America, our America, has had poets since the ancient times of Netzahuacoyotl”, that “it has kept the footprints of the great Bacchus and has learned the Panic alphabet...” This lyrical American, generous, Indian and Greco-Latin at the same time, these poets “the thousand cubs of the Spanish lion” with the help of God will cause Roosevelt-Caliban to tremble.

Darío thus launched a successful slogan, inspired by the underlying image of the good savage. That image of an age of gold,

a paradisiac past, compensates for the many social, historical, economical and cultural frustrations of the Latin-Americans. The different realisms—from that of merely pretending to imitate and reproduce, or interpreting the social fact, or attaining magic, the really marvelous, of our actuality—are always searching for the Indian, trying to bring him to life again, if only in memory or fable, playing at a lost innocence that a good conscience authorizes. The Indian serves as an excuse to rebel against the burdensome present. He has a great part in the obsessive pursuit of an identity to which Latin-American intelligence is ceaselessly devoted. The theme of the Indian has undergone the most varied literary treatments, from romantic and allegorical idealization to accusing and revolutionary posters, including the Mexican frescos, imitations of statuary and the homage of anthropology. Ceding to an indigenism of museum and pantheon, Antonio Arráiz dedicates his book *Aspero*, whose importance as a vitalist proposition cannot be denied, to the “great dead”, to the “glorious lineage” of the eagle Sitting Bull; the prince Moctezuma; the poet Netzahuacoyotl; the tiger Cuauhtemotzin; Caupolicán and Manco Capac...Lacking are only Guaicaipuro and Sorocaima, to honor the Venezuelan aboriginal family. This rhetoric to the glory of the Indian—as it is seen in Arráiz’s book, which opens with this declaration: “I sing my virgin America/I sing my Indian America/Without the Spanish and without Christianity”—appears at the very moment of the Discovery, when Columbus, Vespucci and Cabral proclaim the Edenic innocence of the Indians. The idyllic vision that inspired Montaigne, nourished Rousseau and enflamed Chateaubriand; but Thomas More had already located his *Utopia* in America and Father Las Casas had sanctified this belief in the good savage. The misfortune of Latin America is to have been from its discovery the target of the most diverse projections of the European intelligence—New World, good savage, earthly paradise, El Dorado, the fountain of youth, land of spices and fabulous mines of gold and silver—and to have lost Europe thereafter. The confusion created by this ambiguity is at the origin of a spectre of affirmations and questions, without bases and without answers, that hovers around the theme of originality, of New-Worldism, and the obsessive search for an identity. An intensive process of racial mixing, increased in vast areas by the influx of Negroes, further augmented the confusion as

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to the nature of an American essence. The lack of intellectual defences, due in part to this confusion, and in part to the Hispanic heritage, was an inducement for European intelligentsia to tell us, in no uncertain terms and without the least reticence, who we were.

This loss of Europe and this aberration caused by an irresistible internal dispersion, a confusion, a juxtaposition of cultural and existential time, a historic and social process of reverses and considerable destruction—we recall the terrible affirmation of Bolívar when he dared to say, “Independence is the only good we have acquired at the expense of others”—explain such complex and disputable interpretations, although full of flashes of lucidity, such as those of Hector Murena in his essay *El pecado original de América*. I retain of that daring research his insistence on pointing out that the Latin-American reiterates, in an unprecedented way in history, the experience of the world as revelation of solitude and death, as self-realization opposed to a milieu that, transobjectivated in that way, remains behind.

Our original sin as Latin-Americans would thus be to have been expelled from Europe—in Murena’s eyes the center of spiritualization—in other words organic development—to arrive (or to be born) in an empty milieu, deprived of our original spirituality, delivered up to ourselves. Murena transposed into the American context existentialist doubt and pessimism, the notion of vagrancy, of impermanence, of being where we did not choose to be, a state of mind that César Vallejo admirably defined when he spoke of his “majority”, “in endless pain” and “to have been born thus, with no reason”.

II

We can understand from the preceding that if there was a spiritual continuity between the colonists of British origin, who peopled the Atlantic littoral of North America from Virginia to Maine, and the mother country, it is because they were not burdened with archaic and pagan myths, like those that saturated the medieval soul of the conquistadors, for the most part unemployed mercenaries of the Reconquest, after the fall of Granada. Spanish America suffered the double contradictory charge of the rationalism of the

Renaissance able to conceive ideal societies and the irrational unconscious collective of the Middle Ages, peopled with visions, symbols, angelic or demonic figures, the remains of superstitions and apocalyptic terrors. In succeeding generations, racial mixtures accentuated those contradictions and created others. The ties with Europe became slack and, even if we do not accept the loss of spirituality, as Murena did, it is certain that the conquistador inaugurated a new cycle, found himself exiled in a land to be conquered. Lope de Aguirre, blinded by his dream of Potosí, is a good example of this feeling of solitude and death in the grandiose, meaningless environment of which Murena speaks.

The Puritan colonists do not seem to have been victims of mirages or guided by hallucinations. They arrived in the new land with their families, with the concrete objective of founding wealth within a more fraternal society. We know that among the pilgrims who left England on the *Mayflower* there were 34 men, 29 women, 20 boys and 8 girls. Of the 34 adult men, 18 had a family. They were accompanied by 3 female servants, 5 young manservants and 19 people engaged as artisans, sailors and domestics. From the accounts and adventures of John Smith, they particularly retained his advice to exploit fisheries and the fur trade. They were not on the lookout for mountains of crystal or silver, golden cities or kings covered with gold, fountains of youth or spice forests and were not afraid they would encounter monsters or men of a different species. These Puritans and Quakers have no resemblance to the brutal Spanish conquistadors, without families, violators of Indian women and sackers of villages, haunted by the myths of the Middle Ages, by the marvelous as by the eagerness for gain, by belief in the existence of hidden treasure. However, it was an Englishman, Sir Walter Raleigh, a man of the Renaissance, who spread fantastic tales of unknown animals and beings when he told of his journey among the tribes of the Orinoco, the *Monocelos*, with feet so big they served as umbrellas; the *Mantecoras* with a human head but three rows of teeth in each jaw, the body of a bear, paws of a lion and a scorpion tail; the *Ewaipanomas*, with their face in the middle of their chest. Not to mention the Amazons who seemed to him to be everywhere. But all these fantasies did not prevent Walter Raleigh from seeing the potential agricultural wealth of the regions.

The British, colonizers of the Atlantic Coast of North America,

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were sons of the Reformation; the others, sons of the Counter-Reformation. "The Reformation", writes Brooks Adams, "was, on the whole, an eminently economic fact, and where this is best seen is in England, which would become the financial market of the world". The Reformation involved a redistribution of wealth that would set England on the road to capitalistic expansion and industrial revolution.

England opened up to the world, to maritime routes, to commercial establishments on all the seas. That expansion produced a universalist type of literature, not only that of Shakespeare and Marlowe but also that of Ben Jonson, Milton and Donne. England and its colonies were a world in expansion, with a promising future of growth. This flowering would see the brilliance of the work of Blake; Pope, who revealed an exceptional critical sense; Daniel Defoe, whose Robinson Crusoe went around the world numerous times; Swift, the diffident and skeptical creator of fantastic literature with his Gulliver. English literature had the world for horizon and not just its island. It did not consider itself specifically English.

On the contrary, the Counter-Reformation, supported by the Inquisition and imperial absolutism, closed Spain in on itself, a shadowy mother country of an empire on which the sun never set. The Hapsburgs incarnated the opposing movement to the economic and intellectual upsurge of the Anglo-Saxons. Spain rejected experimental science, philosophic and social criticism, self-criticism, industrial and commercial development. Its colonies kept the political structures of the mother country and, once the age of mythic mirages has passed, wealth was founded on the system of *encomienda*, the origin of latifundia, and on the labor of serfs and slaves.

With maniacal obsession, Philip II, immured in his monastery cell like a monk, made all the decisions concerning his monumental empire, himself resolving all the questions, from the simplest to the most complex. His resolutions could take years. Time did not count for that somber neurotic, devoured, according to the psychiatrist Johannes Cremerius who examined his case, by a love-hate complex toward his father, Charles V, which moved him to carry the plans of the latter to such extremes as to ruin them. "The political conceptions, projects and desires of his father,

to the accomplishment of which Philip wanted to contribute, did not survive his forty-two years of rule and were abolished, failed, were found to be impracticable, ended in their opposite”.

Bent over his dossiers, the monarch established norms, regulations, laws, ordinances, controlled official duties and even official dress. Spain became paralyzed. But since it is necessary to live in spite of everything, another Spain was formed in the shadow of the Crown and the Cross: a country of rogues and beggars, of procurers and prostitutes, of greedy officials and unscrupulous traders, of black market and administrative corruption, of idleness and abuses. Decadence corroded a sterile absolutism from within. Bankruptcy was accentuated with the monarchs that followed. Cremerius sums up the process of Spanish decadence in a paragraph, perhaps too long to quote here but having the merit of being precise:

“With the ascension of Charles VI, the last Hapsburg, to the throne, the last act of the decadence opened very quickly, on which the curtain would definitively fall. Spain collapsed into insignificance, impotence and misery. One hundred years of lethargy kept it outside the evolution appearing in all the surrounding European countries. No industry appeared on its soil; its commerce was taken over by the Protestant States of the North. Sciences lost contact with problems that were exterior to Spain and soon lost importance. Neither the Renaissance nor Humanism found favorable ground there. The current of history stopped at the portals of a country transformed into a fortress. Within the country, a process of fossilization began, in the minute examination of the past and the preservation of the antique. Sclerotic political and religious forms oppressed life, making it sterile under the constraints of precepts and dogmas. To be sure, the Christian faith rose up in a last, static effort to overcome the world (Teresa de Avila). But if the dawn was haloed with a grandiose eschatological hope, this latter at the same time was obliterated by formulas that were more and more empty. The breach widened between religion and morality. An important symptom of the gravity of the malady: no art remained living, through the lack of a search for new ways and new content. The regard of Calderon is turned toward the past: he sings of a time that is past”.

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This is not the place to enlarge upon a process that is at the very root of our under-development but to relate it to literature. Some appreciations of Cremerius in this regard should be rectified, without invalidating his basic judgment. In fact, Spanish literature restrained what we might call its spatial projection to sink into the substructures of tradition or on the contrary to ascend to the heights of mystic revelation, a dissolving ground, a blinding and sonorous emptiness. It traveled only in adventure novels, and then only across the picaresque Spain of thieves and popular realism. Literature also tended to close in on itself, on its language, on the Spanish reality, always more *castiza*—pure in stock—and more provincial in spite of the empire. But English literature was never insular; it traveled with Gulliver and Defoe, with Shakespeare and Marlowe's Faust. It did not confine itself to its racial and linguistic character, in a sort of cultural solipsism. Spanish literature pursued realism and, at the same time, while Spain projected its political and imperial image on the world, literally speaking it seemed to turn its back on it. This is why it was becoming gradually asphyxiated after the 16th century. The universality of Cervantes and that of the mystics ended in the confinement of the baroque. "The baroque", remarks Mariano Picón Salas in his admirable study *De la conquista a la independencia*, published in Mexico in 1944, "is a system of formidable spiritual defenses with which 17th-century Spain affirmed its anti-modern conscience". The baroque is not an affair of mixing, of interlaced cultural forms or of juxtapositions, as we might deduce from some present-day literary opinions, and in addition, in rapport with the too famous "magic realism", but the expression of a suffocation, an art of the alcove, of a preciousness without content, a tendency to a protective ornamentation; an acuteness of the void, an exploit placed only in form, "excess", as Picón Salas qualified it, at whose limit appears disillusion and death since, in the end, the baroque denies life. We recall Borges¹ evoking Balthasar Gracián in his poem *La Gloria*:

*Laberintos, retruécanos, emblemas,
Helada y laboriosa nadería*

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Poetic Works* (1925-1965).

*Fue para este jesuita la poesía
Reducida por él a estratagemas*

Borges asks himself what Gracián must have felt when “*al contemplar de frente/Los Arquetipos y los Esplendores*”, he experienced “*Sol de Dios, la verdad, mostró su fuego*”. The answer, or one of the answers, is that Gracián did not see the glory:

*Y sigue resolviendo en la memoria
Laberintos, retruécanos y emblemas*

We also recall how Charles V prefigured his death by lying down in a coffin for an imitation funeral. The master of the West and an empire was disappointed. As I wrote in a poem, at the end of the Spanish baroque:

*País del desencanto, noche hueca,
vacío que comienza al fin del día
hormigueros de padre, resonancias,
cadáveres que el tiempo transforma en piedra o fuente.*

Under Charles II, who reigned from 1665 to 1700, Spanish literature was already becoming exhausted. It was the beginning of the Moratíns and the Meléndez Valdés, the Ramón de la Cruz and Iriarte. An 18th century without *éclat*, while on the other side of the Pyrenees, in France, Germany and England was beginning a tremendous intellectual growth, along with the philosophy of the Enlightenment rationalizing and secularizing Christianity hoping to re-enforce it. We speak of a Renaissance of Spanish literature in the 19th century. It suffices to think of what its romanticism was in order to reject such a judgment. And Latin America was also experiencing torpor and decadence. It produced no Cervantes or Lope de Vega but some writers inspired by the Spanish picaresque novel, such as Concoloncorvo or Fernández de Lizardi. There was one remarkable exception: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

English literature found a magnificent continuity in the American colonies on the Atlantic coast, and their independence did not interrupt that spiritual and cultural relationship. Melville and Swift, for example, have affinities. As for the Spanish provinces,

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they vegetated in an intellectual limbo. In the same limbo as the mother country, from which the new reigning family of the Bourbons could not extract them, in spite of a relative effort. Murena hit the mark, in a somewhat theological perspective, when he affirmed that we, the Latin-Americans, had been the inhabitants of a land called Europe, fertilized by the spirit, that we had been suddenly expelled and had fallen on another land, crude, empty of spirit, baptized America by chance. For Murena, that flight from Europe toward America was equivalent to a new Fall.

The correctness of this proposition is only approximative. There were indigenous cultures of high spirituality in America, but imperialistic Christianity broke them. The cultural and thus literary isolation of the Spanish Indies comes in fact from the same state of isolation into which had plunged a Spain that turned its back on Europe, on the Renaissance, on the great critical movement brought about by the Reformation, on the deep changes caused by the discovery of the New World. America changed Europe but had little effect on Spain. The absolutism of the Hapsburgs, the forty years of imperial government by Philip II, despiritualized this culture, as well as its intellectual richness. The mystic *élan* was as intense as it was solitary, a flame that rose high only to be extinguished. Creative intelligence and ardent spirit could only be projected into an abstraction and radiant dissolution. The mysticism of the Gold Age had no ancestors and no heirs. The isolation to which Philip II had condemned Spain itself favored this formidable explosion of spirituality. But what peopled Latin America was the maliciousness of the adventurers (*buscones*), the rapacious brutality of the idle soldiers, the material desire to get rich without working, the Inquisition. As for literature, we find only chronicles of events. When the provinces awoke and sought their independence, they looked toward the United States, England and France. The prodigious French 19th century brought the "Frenchification" of Latin-American letters. Or failing to attain those great models, they fell back into the old rut of Spanish romanticism. In short, Latin-American letters were only beginning, were about to begin, had not yet lived, and that is why their successes woke only a feeble echo abroad, why they operated within a closed circuit, the same one in which decadent Spanish literature operated. They tried to make connection with French

letters or, at times, Anglo-Saxon and German, to adopt their manner, their tricks, their stratagems, their cuisine. But if the literary products were superficially modified in that way, their content was not enriched; there was no renewal of style and structure, language and symbols, nor the creation of a specifically literary reality, essentially spiritual.

III

Casticismo impoverished a Spanish literature that today is becoming Europeanized. This passion of identification with the land, the vernacular or Castilian regionalism, this obsessive care for Spanish purity, was extremely damaging. While European literatures were abandoning local color, no longer taking root in popular customs, in the traditional, in the regional, in the name of a universalist communication, an opening, a continual projection, Spanish literature seemed to shore up the walls of its limits, closed its frontiers, fed itself in a process of constant reidentification. The European movements—romanticism, symbolism, *avant-garde*, surrealism—were late in arriving in Spain and even more late in Latin America. Spain resisted Europeanization. It continued to go back to its roots. And Latin America, or rather Latin-American letters, suffered from similar obsessions, notably that of identification: that identity, that famous Latin-American identity always so coveted, had to be found. Who are we? Why are we? When were we? What are we made of? Are we original? Let us defend ourselves against dependency (and there are no letters more dependent on European or North American models than ours!). Let us fight against transculturation (and the Latin-American culture is only transcultural, acculturation!). To doubt one's own identity is a pathological phenomenon.

“Perhaps we are the New World”, said Arturo Uslar Pietri during a seminar. “If we are not, at least we have contributed to the birth of a new era, and the privileged condition which is at present ours must allow us to be counted among the builders of this New World to come...” This assertion is no doubt more valuable than that of Simón Rodríguez, the utopian and inventor of a particular typography, a century ahead of the calligrams and

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other visual effects of the *avant garde*: “Spanish America is original, its institutions and government must be original, the means of establishing them must be original”. *O inventamos o erramos*.

Latin America is not original. The syllogism of Simón Rodríguez thus collapses. A past of utopias, decadence, mirages and frustrations weighs upon our destiny. The Latin-American racial mixture does not have lustral virtues and is not a unique fact in history, which is entirely a circumstance of mixtures, symbioses, antitheses and syntheses. It is clear that we are a prolongation of Spanish culture combined with an aboriginal basis and prolongations of African Negro cultures in some areas. The theme of American originality is contagious. From independence until today, the intelligentsia asks itself about its past, untiringly reviews the cultural factors of which it is composed, looks for its specificity, its condition, questions history, cultivates the roots, neglects the growth, predicts its destiny. The intelligentsia is paralyzed before its own image, in a blind narcissism. It wavers between adoration and rejection. It pursues sociological, economic, historical, psychological definitions that would allow it to know itself. It even waits for these definitions in order to pronounce on itself. It is an intelligentsia that profoundly lacks assurance and, largely for this reason, identity.

The question of national and cultural identity has its importance in the political domain, and it is profitable for the specialist to study it, but it can have only a negative effect if it directs and determines the philosophic or artistic creation whose own values are expressed in terms that have nothing to do with its exteriorization. It is a matter of interiority, like being a man or a woman, which does not need to be constantly expressed lest there be the danger of falling into dogmatic *machismo* or feminism.

The North Americans who write and think do not spend their time wondering who they are: they are Anglo-Saxons, with some nuances. On the contrary, we deny our Spanish self or, no doubt more exactly, we have stopped being Spanish because of our isolation, our abandonment, the state of isolation and abandonment in which we were buried by the decadence of the twilight Spain of the Hapsburgs. Our war of independence was a war to the death between son and father. The paths of continuity

were destroyed. The language itself lost its Spanish character. The political language of the Independence, as we see in Bolivar, is “Frenchified” to an extreme. Literature had to undertake a similar operation, a sort of becoming, which Bello took care of.

Bello’s task was to preserve and create an appearance of novelty, in geography, in the “vast spaces” that could inspire an original literature, as Sarmiento affirmed. It did not have this originality. Nor could it have continuity, because it was equivalent to prolonging a decadence, a literary poverty closed in on itself, that *casticismo* of the type “*cuando una española besa, besa de verdad*”. (When a Spanish woman gives a kiss, she gives it in earnest). Then it imitated, especially, France, a France that knew nothing of America. Paris became the capital of our “intelligentsia”; against all expectations, it still is for many, a century later.

Romanticism, realism, naturalism, positivism, *avant garde*, literature at the service of the people have, in successive waves, inundated our letters. Creation was rarely conceived outside an obsessive subjection to historicity and social reality, always searching for an identity, for an inaccessible and unformulated Latin-Americanism. And this search, the different ways of perceiving historical and social reality, became involved in the ways of writing and thought. Literature wanted to represent rather than create. Represent Creole America, the vastness of the landscape, the forms of racial mixtures, history, social conflicts. To write *cantos generales* rather than “seasons in hell”. This Latin-American insistence on literary representation—a prolonging of the work of the chroniclers of the Conquest—shows our lack of assurance in creating, our dependence on the myth of nationality, our desire to be a nation. This is why writers, instead of writing novels, recount history, write biographies of heroes or brigands, in a political and historical perspective. Can we imagine Malraux, Malcolm Lowry, Faulkner, Durrell or Huxley writing the biography of Walter Raleigh, Queen Elizabeth I or Washington?

IV

It is time to understand, once and for all, that literary creation can only be conceived in terms of itself, not in terms of its utility or

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political, social or historical usage. Of course, this does not exclude that a historical or sociological instruction may emerge from its contents, but as a result and not as an obligation. Our literature had in view, and still has, to be historical, social, useful, representative of our national and American identity, before being literary. This limiting conception, that only a few authors succeed in overcoming, such as Borges, Ramos Sucre, Macedonio Fernández or the unknown Juan Emar, not only bars the way for us to a real spiritualization but also that of the great book markets, that of universalization. "I am Latin-American", the writer on our continent seems to proclaim at the outset. And the effect he produces, in this way, is immediately negative, because he is taken for a rare bird in an aviary, good for a moment's entertainment or for ornithological study. The writer himself marginalizes himself by assuming this role of representative of Latin-American authenticity. Neither Swift, nor Melville, neither Poe nor Eliot, Ibsen nor Flaubert wore a sign on their forehead declaring they were English, American, Scandinavian or French.

Nationality is given for life and is understood. It saturates a creation like a climate and not like a passport. Nobody can write with his eyes fixed on the prospect of national identity. Writing has its own exigencies. It is a specific reality. As for the content and symbols, they will be all the more valuable if they are widely projected. It is in departing from the national that one arrives at the universal. We know that. But one does not reach the universal if one is obsessed by the immediacy of nationalism.

Melville's whalers came from everywhere and, beyond the picturesqueness of seaport life, what they reveal is the intense variety of the human condition. The myths of our time are found again in stories such as that of *Wuthering Heights*; *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the admirable novel by Stevenson which the cinema has given us in a deformed and literal fashion; *Alice in Wonderland*, whose symbolism astonishes artists as well as psychiatrists; Frankenstein and his monster, the *roman noir* by Shelley's wife, Mary Godwin, without mentioning the science fiction of Jules Verne; fantastic literature from Ovid to Borges, including *Cyrano de Bergerac*; the *Thousand and One Nights*. Perhaps it is Faust who best incarnates the will to power and immortality of our civilization in crisis. Spanish literature has of

course furnished two universal types, Don Quixote and Celestina, but Latin-American heroes in general are sociological entities rather than universal types. Through them, their authors always seem to proclaim the national identity, regional circumstances when not historical and social. To whom would it occur to look for the North American type in the spectral or dream figures of Poe? Faulkner did not write as a Southerner, for the Southerners and with the intention of representing the South of the United States. Creativity must go beyond the national, which does not mean that this should be denied or hidden. The national essence is part of living experience and does not need to be proclaimed. The obsession with its representation limits a work. *Under the Volcano* takes place in Mexico; the action of Durrell's great lyrical *feuilleton*, his quartet, takes place in Alexandria; the location of Huxley's *Brave New World* is not given. Lawrence repeats his messages in England, Australia, Mexico and Italy; Malraux transports his inquiry into the human condition to China. Of course, universality should not be taken in the sense of a travel brochure. Many novelists make use of exotic locales.

The character of Joyce accomplishes an immense periplus in one day and in his own city. What is important, what I am trying to say, is that the Latin-American writer should rid himself of certain conceptual constants that limit his creativity, such as the will to represent Latin America, the obsession with reflecting his own identity, submission to historical material, the belief that he is the subject of an original, genic and magic world, not to mention what has regrettably limited our literature: the sacrifice of the imagination on the altar of reality. No one is sure what that reality is, because it can be geographic, social, psychological, historical, magical, baroque, popular, revolutionary, political and folkloric. Realism does not mean anything and has been the principal school or way of conceiving the literature of our Latin-American countries. And this desire for realism is another tribute paid to the search for our identity.

Each generation, when it wants to affirm itself, proposes to universalize the language in order to be contemporaneous with the rest of the world. Because of its international audience, the group of novelists of the "boom", with more conviction than preceding generations, asserts that it has gone beyond the usual limitations

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of our literature, especially the realism of imitation, to penetrate into the “other reality”, that of literature *per se*, that of style, of writing. This is only partly true, because the same schema is still being repeated: new procedures for the eternal search for Latin-American identity. This is why Severo Sarduy, pushing Cuban baroque to the limit—inclined to a view from other perspectives than those of Carpentier, the least baroque of all the great Cuban authors—proposes a literature that would be an “apotheosis of artifice” and rejects the saga, the Americanist fresco, experiences, ontological research and the magic realism he defines as a spurious option between the saga and the exteriorization of interior experience. Severo Sarduy aspires to the sovereignty of the written word, unconstrained, resting on its own materiality, on the pure, free rotation of signs.

I do not share this interest of Sarduy and believe, like Maurice Blanchot, that such a literature goes toward its essence, which is its disappearance. Because if literature must be founded on writing and on its own proper reality, this reality is nourished by what is exterior to literature itself. But Sarduy is a typical example of a present tendency, very precise and frequent: that of writing departing from literature and not from life. The baroque in vogue in Cuban writing sees in a way its fulfillment in Severo Sarduy. A baroque that, as he himself has explained, is not a return to a proliferant nature, an Amazonian forest as Carpentier said, but “made artificial”, irony and derision of nature, a writing that involves another writing in a constant interlacing. Sarduy, in a very Latin-American fashion, locates himself at the extreme position of the *avant garde* of the moment to escape the traditional snares in which, according to him, the “boom” has been caught. It remains to be seen if Sarduy will succeed in definitively transcending the Americanist orbit and reach an international audience as fully and singularly as Borges, who took on all those subjects with an exuberance of intelligence and irony.

Sarduy’s conception of the baroque is correct. And what characterizes present Cuban literature is not the “Amazonian” baroque of Carpentier but the artificialization of Sarduy. It is baroque as defined by Mariano Picón Salas. I have often wondered what the reason is for this baroque tendency so manifest in Cuban letters since the appearance of the magazine *Avance* (1927-1930)

which, defending purism as *avant garde*, defined it in this way: "Exercise of beauty or reflection entirely detached from the immediate human reality". The poetry of Mariano Brull was in itself a beginning of baroque exercise.

Until the end of the 19th century, Cuba was a Spanish colony and, in addition, an island colony. And letters in Spain at that time were without lustre. The little Cuban colony was suffocated, closed in on itself, lulled by *sones* and *danzones*, while the Afro-Cuban population set up its extraordinary creation of myth and magic. The nascent literature was also suffocating. It was a hothouse culture, a patio vegetation, cane fields. Rum and sugar. Beaded screens surmounted with small colored windows. I think of the arabesques in the paintings of interiors by Amalia Pélaez and Portocarrero. A baroque of the alcove and interiorizations by Lezama Lima, the narrative structural baroque of Guillermo Cabrera Infante and Reynaldo Arenas, the apotheosis of the baroque and verbal artifice of Severo Sarduy. The classic in this panorama: Alejo Carpentier.

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To conclude, it is opportune to recognize as a fundamental condition the mortifying relationship between literary development and development *per se*. It is not only a problem of market and readers but also of a potentialization of the creativity that is transmitted by osmosis to the writer by a powerful advanced country, creator of technostructures and representations. Latin-American marginality and disorganization, on the contrary, weaken the writer. The mediocre poetry of Evtushenko, for example, would have had no audience if, instead of being Russian, he had been from Honduras. We could give many similar examples. Moreover, today the mechanisms of the great cultural industry come into play; its centers are not in Latin America but in Europe, Japan, the Soviet Union and the United States.

The criticism I have formulated is at the same time a self-criticism. Only a sharp critical sense can lead to overcoming the problems. Our letters today are in an ambiguous position. On the one hand, they have realized the limitations implied by a blind

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attachment to some conceptions, such as utilitarian realism; the exaltation of the national; edifying popularism; simplistic explanations that make Yankee imperialism responsible for all our deficiencies, even spiritual; the platitude of propaganda art. On the other hand, the rise of the novel, the Nobel prizes awarded, the operation "boom" (already over), the expansion of the market thanks to the development of Spanish editions, may accentuate tendencies to self-satisfaction, make us believe that such a rise is due to the representative nature of certain works and that the famous cultural identity has at last been found. These are dangerous tendencies, since the accent would then fall on a functional literature, on the legend of the originality of the Latin-American, on monumental representation. We can thus only invite the Latin-American writer to exercise criticism and self-criticism, to found literature on style, writing and its own exigencies, to cultivate the imagination that is so lacking in letters in the Spanish language, to perceive his identity as individual and as national, as a fact of experiences—perhaps chaotic—that gradually rise one after the other throughout life, experiences that are carried within himself and do not need to be defined; to invite him to cultivate a spirit that has no frontiers and no history.

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