From Europe to Latin American*

Ways of Reframing Literary Circulation

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Abstract

In this paper, we will first present two precursors of World Literature as a transnational project: Hugo Meltzl (1846–1908) and Machado de Assis (1839–1908), authors whose paths never crossed, but who both produced arguments against the grain of the nationalist wave sweeping the West in the nineteenth century. Having done so, we will provide a concise examination of historical ways of looking at the relationship between Europe and America, and finally of ideas of imitation/emulation in the literature and culture of Latin America.

Keywords

World Literature – literary and cultural circulation – imitation and emulation in Latin America

If World Literature is a term that seeks to embrace those works that circulate beyond their cultures of origin, and the questions born of that circulation, then one of the most productive questions we can raise about it is: what do we consider to be the *original culture* of such works?

When we speak of *literature* in the Americas, we must remember that this is, to a degree, an extension of European culture. Not necessarily *more of the same*,

* Translated by Flora Thomson-DeVeaux

because whatever came over from Europe did not arrive in the New World at the same time, nor in the same way, nor with the same meanings that it held on the Old Continent; and the selective filter to which it was subjected in the Americas as to what was of interest (or not)—as well as the reasons for that judgment—already constituted a difference. We might add that the historical moment of literary and cultural circulation is also relevant, even in terms of certain of its material aspects. In the past, works entered the Americas after long journeys by boat, and had to go through a series of controls that included censorship. In the present, a simple click on a computer screen can make a work immediately accessible for an interested reader. In this paper, we will discuss how the circulation of literature and culture between Europe and Latin America took place in previous historical periods, with special focus on the argument that Latin America was home to a belated reiteration of European literature and culture.

Our short exploration will begin with a clear example of how two authors (one European, one South American), who were contemporaries but never read each other's works, were able to produce similar ideas that remain surprisingly relevant. We will see a number of arguments from Hugo Meltzl and Machado de Assis that may now be considered precursors to concepts associated with World Literature, then move on to a concise examination of the historical ways in which the relationship between Europe and America has been seen, and finally address ideas of imitation/emulation in the literature and culture of Latin America.

Beyond National Borders

World Literature is an expression that, while related to Goethe's *weltliteratur*, has taken on a form of its own. While World Literature emphasizes the circulation of literary works beyond their points of origin, many other aspects must be taken into consideration, including the asymmetrical positions of authors and works in international circulation, shaped by the relative advantages enjoyed by languages and cultures on the global market. As for World Literature's angle on literature beyond national borders, we will bring forth two contemporaries who both produced arguments against the grain of the nationalist wave sweeping the West in the nineteenth century: Hugo Meltzl (1846–1908) and Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis (1839–1908).

As is widely known, Meltzl founded Europe's first journal of comparative literature, *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (1877–1887), at a time when he would himself declare that comparative literature was “nevertheless

by no means a fully defined and established academic discipline" (35). Far from Gervinus' nationalist view of literary history, Meltzl wanted his journal to be "devoted at the same time to the art of translation and to the Goethian *Weltliteratur*" (Meltzl 35). He turned to literary history, a field where nationalism was taking fervent root, to defend a comparatist's perspective that might mitigate the use of political and nationalistic criteria, so present in his period that he would lament that "modern literary history, as generally practiced today, is nothing but an *ancilla historiae politicae*, or even an *ancilla nationis*" (35).

In Latin America, we might say that the most important Word Literature text *avant la lettre* was "Reflections on Brazilian Literature at the Present Moment: The National Instinct," published in New York in 1873. Though the title might smack of yet another defense of local color or the ideology of nineteenth-century literary nationalism in Brazil (with literature placed as *ancilla nationis* (handmaiden to the nation), as Hugo Meltzl would put it four years later, Machado, quite to the contrary, critiques those very nationalist assumptions, rejecting the doctrine by which "the only Works of true national spirit are those that describe local subjects, a belief that if correct, would greatly limit the resources available to our literature" ("Reflections" 134).

Curiously, although this text was originally published in the United States, in 1873, it was only translated to English recently. In nineteenth-century Brazil, Machado de Assis was addressing the writers and critics of his time, who believed that postcolonial Brazilian literary production ought to work towards expressing the essence of the emerging nation. At the time, that would have been principally through the description of landscapes, inhabitants, customs, local fauna and flora, and other elements included under the umbrella of "local color." Without denying the validity of this sort of postcolonial literary project, Machado de Assis does question the validity of its exclusive posture. As he saw it, it was not only limiting to demand a blind focus on "national subjects," but it was also unnecessary; even when speaking about topics apparently outside the scope of the nation, authors would approach them from a perspective that bore the marks of the works' context of origin. Machado de Assis moves to bolster his argument with examples of foreign authors:

I would simply ask if the author of the *Song of Hiawatha* did not also write the *Golden Legend*, which has nothing to do with the land that gave birth to it, nor with its admirable composer. And I would ask further if *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Julius Cesar*, and *Romeo and Juliet* have anything to do

with English history or take place on British soil, and if, Shakespeare is not, in addition to being a universal genius, also an essentially English poet.

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If the place of origin remains present even when the writer's object is temporally or geographically "distant," then what stance should he take? For Machado de Assis, the explicit presence of "local color" is purely superficial. One should demand something else entirely:

What we should expect of the writer above all is a certain intimate feeling that renders him a man of his time or space. Some time ago, a notable French critic analyzed Masson, a Scottish writer, and said that just as one could be Breton without constantly speaking of the broom, a shrub, so could Masson be a good Scot without ever mentioning the thistle, and he added that there was in Masson a certain inner Scottishness, which was distinct and superior for not being merely superficial.

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Today, we know that the place and time in which a text is produced are important elements. When dealing with works circulating within what is known as World Literature, then, one should also consider the meanings active in the places where the texts bearing that label are appropriated.

When we speak of an element that originates in one place and is transferred to another, however, we see that the idea of *origin* is also problematic—among other things, because it implies an attribution of a temporal and geographic beginning-point to ideas and texts. Traditionally, comparatism engaged with *sources* and *influences*, working with the hypothesis that author x *influenced* or was a *source* for author y, but would go no further, stopping short before exploring far deeper-running layers of historical meanings. As we shall shortly see the importance of the concepts of *imitation* and *emulation* in discussions around the meaning of literature in Latin America, we will now give an example of the limitations of this "search for the origin" that frequently contaminates the European scholarship on Latin American texts.

In a forthcoming essay, "Machado de Assis and French Literature," Jacqueline Penjon of the Sorbonne Nouvelle observes:

At times [in the works of Machado de Assis], only the name of a writer or a work will be mentioned. In this sense, the title of La Fontaine's fable *L'astrologue qui se laisse tomber dans un puits* may be found in

Ressurreição [*Resurrection*, an 1872 novel by Machado de Assis]. Félix and Flávia say, in reference to Menezes: “an ancient astrologer who, upon contemplating the stars, fell into a well.”

Penjon is absolutely correct, and this may be corroborated by the fact that Machado de Assis not only owned the complete works of La Fontaine, but also referenced him by name at points across his oeuvre. The image used by the French author, however, is not exactly his own; it can be traced at least as far back as Aesop’s (pre-Christian) fable “The Astrologer Who Fell into a Well,” which circulated extensively in Europe, in Latin and then in translations, adaptations, and rewritings in a variety of national languages, all long before *L’Astrologue qui se laisse tomber dans un puits*. No one is obliged to be as erudite as Hans Blumenberg, who described and commented on the circulation of this narrative from antiquity onward, even tracing the evolution of the idea. Indeed, we might ask if we aren’t just gazing at the stars today, with the risk of falling into the well that we cannot see. But since our task here is not to stargaze, let us observe how a perspective came into focus around the literary and cultural circulation between Europe and the Americas.

Europe and the Americas

Although Europe no longer pulls the political and economic weight it once did, there are still those in the Americas who consider certain Eurocentric parameters drawn up long ago in the field of literary studies to stand as universal criteria. It was in relation to European literary production, after all, that there emerged arguments that literature in the Americas was nothing but a tardy version of what was written before in the Old Continent. In this sense, “imitation” implies the reiteration of an allegedly superior precursor.

These arguments also stand at the root of a shifting heritage of preformed judgments around the positive or negative evaluation of certain authors or works, resulting in a variety of verdicts at different points in the past. There is, however, a certain fundamental presupposition in the way literature is approached in the Americas, which may be summed up as follows: *what we call literature was initially developed in Europe, and was “imported” into the New World as an array of works, parameters for value judgments, and models for the production of other works*. In consequence, one assumes that *literature* in the Americas meant, in its earliest stages, an expansion on forms of the production and consumption of *literature* that had been forged overseas; but one cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that the new contextual conditions inherent in

this importation also generated differences. Even when the Europe-America literary circuit gave rise to analogous repertoires, then, other factors had to be considered as well.

The expansion of *literature* in the Americas was not merely a reiteration of the same; that which was received was altered, and novelties emerged from new contextual conditions in the process. In terms of the circulation of meanings, the *originals* derived from European perspectives, but they were also permeated by other meanings born of the cultural encounter with the Americas. Brazilian writer José de Alencar had already indicated as much in 1865, in the postface to the second edition of his novel *Iracema*: “One would do well to remember that the son of the new world receives the traditions of the indigenous races, and lives in contact with nearly all of the civilized races who come to moor here, brought by immigration” (314).

These cultures of other countries, which would gain independence from their European origins in the Americas—from the late eighteenth century to the first half of the nineteenth—were themselves sprung of a process that Cuban writer Fernando Ortiz (1940) dubbed *transculturation*, the emergence of a sort of cultural “third way,” neither a reiteration of a European model nor the reproduction of the indigenous framework in place prior to the Europe-America encounter. An awareness of this process may explain why even a conservative author like José de Alencar—when pressed on his using the Portuguese language in ways not seen in Portugal—would respond that it wasn’t he who had transformed the language into something other than its metropolitan form: “The craftsmen of the transformation of our languages are representatives of all these many races, from the Saxon to the African, that make of this soil an exuberant amalgam of blood, traditions, and languages” (314).

After Alencar and Ortiz—though we have to consider that the literatures of the Americas are, in certain respect, an expansion on European models—we must also recall that the transculturation carried out on American soil meant that local products were not simply belated copies of the works developed in the Old World, but rather an *amalgam* (Alencar) in which European elements made an important but not exclusive contribution. Indeed, if we think in terms of importation, this leads us down a fresh line of issues and questions.

To begin with, since not everything in Europe was “imported” over here, we must consider the factors shaping which literary elements were (or weren’t) “imported.” As for the “imported” ones, they often acquire different meanings in the New World as they interact with American—not European—surroundings.

In earlier stages, of course, literary studies paid heavy tribute to their European origins, both in the value placed on certain Old World national literatures

and the internalization of nineteenth-century nationalism as the basis of the discipline. Comparing works from different national literatures and deducing conclusions from those differences was a part of that agenda, expressed in terms of concepts such as *source*, *influence*, *imitation*, etc. In terms of the identity-related issues that have been present since the nineteenth century, we should recall that while we cannot ignore the values from which those issues sprang in the 1800s, we also have the benefit of a posterior chain of consistent critiques of those values, keeping us from being governed by them, on the terms of the period in which they emerged.

During the nineteenth century in South America, there were those who sought to deny any Iberian heritage as well as the idea that textual production in postcolonial countries had any obligation to pay tribute to any literary system beyond its own. The rejection of heritage was perfectly comprehensible, similar to reactions in other situations in that century, which found ex-colonies seeking to demarcate their differences in relation to their former metropolises, underscoring the supposedly unique and singular (“original”) nature of these new countries’ output.

This idea of *originality*, characteristic of the nineteenth century, has persisted and remains today; but we know that before the period, the notions of *imitation* and *emulation* were valued, in the absence of an imagination in which a work emerges independently of tradition, or exclusively from the author’s subjectivity. While we may understand why the nineteenth century rejected the practice of emulation, however, it is time to rescue the concept.

Poetics of Emulation

We must restore the concept of emulation on two levels, drawing the distinction between *aemulatio*—a fundamental technique in the pre-Romantic literary and artistic system—and the *poetics of emulation*, a deliberately anachronistic effort developed specifically in nonhegemonic circumstances. This is not an exclusively Brazilian dilemma, nor Lusophone, nor even Latin American, but a difficulty on a more general scale that involves asymmetrical relations of symbolic power.

The most succinct way to clarify the political consequences of the anachronistic return to emulation would be to recall the dilemma faced by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento during his exile in Chile, in the 1840s. How to bring readers to *El Progreso*, the newspaper he had founded, if the European and North American papers were also available and even got to Santiago de Chile *first*? To understand his predicament Sarmiento filled a good part of *El Progreso* by

compiling articles from foreign periodicals. Now, how to compete with publications whose news are always “fresher” and whose perspectives tend to shape readers’ opinions? Why wait for the selection of news and feature articles if the reading public already had access to the texts in the original language and could do without translation entirely? Sarmiento’s response to this is exemplary and reveals the structural element underlying the defining procedures of the poetics of emulation: “Our daily outdoes the best-known in Europe and America, for the quite obvious reason that, being one of the last newspapers in the world, we have at our disposition, *to select from in the best possible way*, all that the other newspapers have published” (Sarmiento; italics added).¹

Upon reading Sarmiento’s spirited reply, the reader will probably think of the works of Oswald de Andrade. And he is quite right, as this is a strategy related to cultural cannibalism—that is, Oswaldian anthropophagy.

Similarly, in search of these structural affinities, one might mention another article from the young Gabriel García Márquez, “The Possibilities of Cannibalism.” Published in 1950—the same year that Oswald de Andrade completed *A crise da filosofia messiânica* (The Crisis of Messianic Philosophy), the essay in which he built on the consequences of cultural cannibalism—García Márquez’s text moves in a similar direction: “Cannibalism would give rise to a new concept of life. It would be the beginning of a new philosophy, a new and fecund path for the arts” (48).

Let us bring to our reflection another important Latin American author: Machado de Assis. His *crônica* in *A Semana* from September 1, 1895, is dedicated to alleged cases of cannibalism from Guinea and a rural part of Minas Gerais. Machado de Assis’ ironic conclusion might just as easily have been penned by Oswald or García Márquez: “Refrains are crutches that the strong should cast away. When the custom of cannibalism returns, there will be nothing to do but trade ‘Love one another,’ from the gospels, for this doctrine: ‘Eat one another.’ After all, these are the two refrains of civilization” (Machado *A Semana* 673).

The reappearance of this subject sheds light on the meaning of the poetics of emulation: developing strategies to deal with the constitutive presence of the other, adopted as both model and authority.

Sarmiento’s attitude suggests that being perennially at the forefront may be an insurmountable limit: those in such a position have nothing before their eyes. This is why vanguards soon cease to be iconoclasts and become zealous guardians of their own memory, in a proliferation of institutional oxymora: *museums of modern and contemporary art*. The lagging position staked out

1 We owe this quotation to Jens Andermann.

by Sarmiento as editor of *El Progreso* ensures him an unexpected advantage: everything is available to him, spread out like items on an endless menu, in a perspective that defines a new way of understanding art and thought in nonhegemonic circumstances. In the *crónica* on a hypothetical return to cannibalism, Machado de Assis confesses: "We do nothing more than spin round and round, as the other used to say" (*A Semana* 672). Certainly, and, above all, *as the other used to say*, in the oscillation that defines the power of reverse anachronism.

In the next century, another Argentine would reformulate Sarmiento's question. In the terms proposed by Ricardo Piglia in his study of the novels of Witold Gombrowicz: "What happens when one belongs to a secondary culture? What happens when one writes in a marginal language? ... Here, Borges and Gombrowicz become more similar. We have only to recall one of the fundamental texts of Borges' poetics: "The Argentine Writer and Tradition." What to say of tradition? ... *How to become universal, in this suburb of the world?*" (Piglia 72; italics added).

These questions—and it would not be difficult to string together a host of quotations with similar inquiries—help to define the political repercussions of the poetics of emulation. Once again, they *have nothing to do with any outdated ontology of the periphery*, and simply refer to a concrete situation of inequality in cultural exchanges. The poetics of emulation brings together an array of techniques employed by intellectuals, writers, and artists involved in asymmetrical relations, and occupying the less-favored side of such exchanges—be they cultural, political, or economic in nature. Practices of emulation, however, are not the exclusive province of one context or another.

A striking manifestation of this phenomenon is that an incredible variety of authors appeal to the same semantic field when addressing the issue. In Milton Hatoum's story "Encontros na península" (Encounters on the Peninsula), a young, hard-up Brazilian writer is lucky enough to meet a Catalan woman looking to learn Portuguese quickly. The motive is somewhat peculiar: "I don't want to speak it," she said firmly. "I want to read Machado de Assis" (1172). This is a case of a tardy, but nonetheless delicious bit of revenge. Victoria Soller, a disciplined student, has ended her relationship with the Lisbon native Soares, a man obsessed with proving the superiority of the literature of Eça de Queirós. Predictably enough, the Catalan comes to disagree with her ex-lover. Her dialogue with her Portuguese teacher echoes Ricardo Piglia's question:

It's clear that Machado's narrators are horrid, ironic, and all geniuses. And the man was cultured, as a matter of fact. Extremely cultured, *verdad?*

The nineteenth century in France produced any number of great writers of prose. *But how could Machado de Assis have appeared in the suburbs of the world?*

Mysteries of the suburbs, I said. Or perhaps of the *literature of the suburbs*.

PIGLIA 105; italics added

From this perspective, Carpentier's reference to Rivera is crucial, and sheds light on the intersection between Piglia and Hatoum: *When Diego Rivera, a man in whom pulses the soul of the continent, tells us, "My master, Picasso."* Long after the advent of the Romantic revolution, the process of passing on the craft within painting schools preserved the model of *imitatio* and *aemulatio*, as aspiring painters would have to submit to intense training based on the diligent reproduction of canvases by the masters.

Picasso's trajectory is exemplary, and allows us to add depth to our reflection. He began his career by patiently learning the technique of his craft by copying masterpieces. Even in his most iconoclastic period, he continued to emulate tradition as well as contemporary colleagues, Matisse in particular.

Shouldn't we recall Picasso's origins? A native of Málaga, a true center of the periphery, he traveled to Madrid—central in Spain, but a peripheral space in the artistic system—and then finally came to Paris, the center of the artistic world. In any case, he needed to adapt to this new environment before he could conquer it. A remarkable exhibition sought to do justice to this dimension of the Spanish painter's art. I am referring to a show mounted in Paris in 2008, "Picasso et les maîtres," which revolved around the idea of a new interpretation of the painter's oeuvre and, above all, his artistic strategies.

In a provocative essay, "Picasso cannibale: Deconstruction-reconstruction des maîtres," the curator suggests: "This painting of painting practiced by Picasso is, as we have said, a form of cannibalism" (Bernadac 49). In her vision, Picasso could only become an icon of twentieth-century art when he began to consciously appropriate tradition, in a double-edged process intrinsically tied into *imitatio* and *aemulatio*, comprising what we have called the poetics of emulation. This is how we have interpreted her observation that "one of the characteristics of this period is the use of repetition as a form of creation" (Bernadac 48). Now, *repeating in order to innovate* was the essence of classical technique. The most provocative inventors in nonhegemonic cultures, whether consciously or not, developed a strategy of updating aesthetic procedures that predated the Romantic idealization of the ideas of "genius," "subjectivity," and "creation."

In such a situation, a typical indulgence for creators of hegemonic cultures is the idle dispute to determine who is the most “original,” in the effort to defend an impossible aesthetic primogeniture. In nonhegemonic cultures, for those who work with marginal languages, such a statement will take on an unintended comic tone. The originality bias may thus be swapped out for the development of textual complexity. Reading appears as the source of all invention, able to shatter hierarchies, conjure unexpected temporalities, and sometimes turn them on their head entirely.

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