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Review/Reseña

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World Literature From the Margins

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Héctor Hoyos's *Beyond Bolaño: The Global Latin American Novel* is an important contribution to both studies of the contemporary (post 1989) Latin American novel and studies of World literature. Rather than extending the purview of World Literature into Latin America, the study tries to reimagine World Literature from a Latin Americanist perspective. The book is divided into five chapters preceded by a substantive introduction and followed by a lengthy conclusion. It provides close readings of novels by Bolaño, Volpi, Padilla, Buarque, Eltit, Fuguet, Aira, Aridjis, Vallejo (Fernando) and Bellatin and brings into play in the analyses a number of objects from other media (advertising posters, visual arts, performances). A lengthy quote from the conclusion makes clear the scope and thematics of the study:

This is where the Global Latin American novel, as a form that embodies the intensification of cultural interdependence in the post-1989 period, conceiving totalities from its own historical coordinates, comes in. It seeks to turn Latin America into one of the poles that structures the ensemble. To that effect, it conceives of Alephs, paradoxical representations of the world as a whole, which destabilize, and thus reveal, world consciousness. Its effects are extraliterary, in the way that influential works of art often [are]. Borges's

short story affects how a reader from any tradition, in any language, would conceive of Buenos Aires. As this book has shown, today there are multiple sites for Latin Americanism that come together in a coherent picture: Rio de Janeiro, Santiago, Medellín, Mexico City, and Buenos Aires, among others. [...] More than individual cities, what has changed in Latin America is the lettered city, to adopt Ángel Rama's famous coinage. The novels studied in this book document this transformation, not necessarily by thematizing it or by making it the object of their storytelling, but by embodying it in their form. In my reading, these works seek to bring about a change in world consciousness by resignifying the last wave of globalization and by capitalizing on the promise of multipolarity. (191-192)

Titling his critical study "Beyond Bolaño" gives a nod toward the commercial and academic success the Chilean Roberto Bolaño's novels have quickly achieved for themselves in the last two decades or so, to such an extent that they have eclipsed the work of other writers from Latin America in the world market. This study aims to rectify this imbalance, seeing Bolaño's novels as a portal onto a certain kind of Latin American novel rather than the be-all-and-end-all of Latin American novels. The second half of the title, the phrase beyond the colon, "The Global Latin American Novel," activates three intertwined notions: globalization, Latin Americanism, and World Literature. Hoyos's study focuses on the period after 1989 and sees this year as a watershed year in the accelerating economic and cultural interdependence of the modern world. He is not insensitive to the arguments that globalization began earlier, with the Industrial Revolution or with Columbus's voyage to the New World, but 1989 signals a shift from the bipolar world order that characterized the Cold War to a multi-polar world characterized by increased communication (the beginnings of the Internet) and flows of peoples and goods. This is even more true if one adopts Hoyos's concept of the "long 1989", which would reach back to 1987 (the beginning of Soviet reforms) and stretch forward to at least 1992 (the end of the Salvadoran civil war). Hoyos's focus on Latin American global novels evokes the area-study category of Latin Americanism but it does so in relation to the concept of World Literature, creating a contrapuntal relationship between the two in which one compliments and/or questions the assumptions of the other. Global Latin American novels are novels that have a global resonance (and marketability one assumes). They are also novels that represent a highly integrated globalized world. Hoyos's metaphor for such novels comes from Borges's short story, "The Aleph," which posits the existence of a magical orb, located in a basement in a house in Buenos Aires, from which one can see any part of the world and any moment in history simultaneously. For Hoyos, the

novels that he selects for analysis act as literary maps for navigating something that he calls “world consciousness.”

The first chapter analyses the trope of Nazism in three contemporary Latin American novels, Bolaño’s *Nazi Literature in the Americas* (*La literatura nazi en América*, 1996; trans., 2008), Jorge Volpi’s *In Search of Klingsor* (*En busca de Klingsor*, 1999; trans., 2002), and Ignacio Padilla’s *Shadow Without a Name* (*Amphitryon*, 2000; trans., 2003). The Nazi scenarios of these novels allow Hoyos to talk about the transnational flow of ideologies (not just flow of people and of goods) as well as to talk about fascist tendencies home grown in the Americas. More importantly, according to Hoyos these novels proclaim the centrality of Nazism in the global imagination and assert a privileged place for Latin America in the discussion of the legacy of the Second World War. With some enthusiasm Hoyos sees in these novels “a repositioning of the world” (59)—this despite the fact (or perhaps because) Latin America was one of the few regions of the world where there were no World War II battles. These novels challenge the “dominant narratives of globalization and their assumptions about centrality, periphery, and the directionality of cultural exchange” (58).

The second chapter focuses more narrowly, on one novel by Brazilian songwriter-poet-dramatist-novelist Chico Buarque de Hollanda, *Budapest* (*Budapeste*, 2003; trans. 2004), seeing it as an example of a work that intimates the modern dissolution of distance, bringing disparate and distant countries into close proximity. Following the life of a ghostwriter from Brazil to Hungary and back to Brazil, the novel disrupts “familiar circuits of transnational cultural exchange” (67), indulging in a South-South escapism and avoiding Euro-Atlantic centers of power. Set in an atypical locale for a Latin American novel (there are other such novels), *Budapest* makes of Hungary the object of an orientalist discourse, which is an ironic reversal of the typical scenario for Latin America. More importantly, Hoyos sees the novel as “remediating” (91) the relationship between the local and the global, not just colonizing the Old World in reverse but rather leading us to question and transform our own “belonging in the world” (92) and leading us to reconsider “how we think about power in a globalized era” (93).

The third chapter focuses on supermarkets as privileged sites of transnational capitalism, through an analysis of Diamela Eltit’s novel *Mano de obra* (Labor, 2002), Alberto Fuguet’s *Bad Vibes* (*Mala onda*, 1991; trans. 1997), and several pieces by César Aira (principally the novella *La prueba* [The Proof, 1992]). These texts, according to Hoyos, reveal, “the economic forces that shape our globalized reality” (97), and are

clear examples of world literature because the substitution of small markets and supermarkets by transnational supermarket franchises and a concomitant increased consumerism are common phenomena worldwide. Eltit's opaque, experimental novel, narrated from the point of view of various workers, rehearses the history of Chilean labor relations and makes clear the ideological underpinnings of the supermarket. Fuguet, on the other hand, a younger Chilean writer, has written about his own generation as one shaped by free trade and has celebrated the artist free of a parochial nationality and open to the world (110-111). *Mala onda*, set in the days of the Chilean plebiscite on Pinochet, has at its center a key scene set in a supermarket, which Hoyos analyzes for the way in which social structures and hierarchies are challenged but ultimately reaffirmed. For Hoyos, Aira's violent novella, *La prueba*, sets up the supermarket as a microcosm of capitalist society, where gender roles are subverted or reinvented by the lesbian lovers Mao and Lenin, and where literally anything can happen. As a group, these novels "give a human face to globalization, not only (as might be expected) by building solidarity with supermarket workers, but by condensing social contradiction into fictional aisles of produce" (123).

Hoyos's fourth chapter focuses on a common theme in contemporary novels from Latin America, the confluence of global networks of Christianity and drug trafficking. He analyses two *narconovelas*, *Our Lady of the Assassins* (*La Virgen de los sicarios*, 1994; trans., 2001) by Colombian author Fernando Vallejo and *La Santa Muerte* (Holy Death, 2004) by the Mexican poet, novelist and environmental activist Homero Aridjis. These novels do not develop the theme of drug trafficking for the purposes of pure entertainment, nor do they posit an alternative to or a fundamental critique of the War on Drugs. But they do, according to Hoyos, "conjure a global polity" from a distinctly Latin American context, thus laying bare the tension between the local and global. Rather than adopting the *narconovela* as a world-literary genre, the critic can use these novels as a "springboard to critique the hegemonic global order that underwrites narcotrafficking" (28). The critic can also specify that the genre of the *narconovela* arose in Latin America and was born of the Latin American social situation, meaning that global manifestations of the theme should be read *after* the *narconovela*. This is a clear instance of the readerly movement that Hoyos is promoting, that is, the reading of world literature from the particularities-rich Latin Americanist perspective.

The fifth chapter of *Beyond Bolaño* is perhaps the most interesting methodologically, in that it clearly expands the comparisons beyond literature. Here Hoyos puts into play texts by César Aira as well by the Mexican-Peruvian Mario

Bellatin that incorporate the concerns of contemporary art. This leads to fascinating readings of literature alongside analyses of works by Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys. Allusions to Duchamp and Beuys in the novels by these two novelists question the “commodification of authorship in the global literary marketplace” (29). These two novelists are not followers of global trends, according to Hoyos. On the contrary, they are “beacons for emerging global forms”—another example of the enrichment of world literature (and its destabilization?) from the periphery.

There are many good things about this study. The novels selected for analysis are fascinating, clearly different from the novels of the Boom and Post-Boom in terms of thematics and formal characteristics. The study also acts as a counterweight to some of the more abstract and Eurocentric studies in “World Literature. The central move to question the assumptions of World Literature from the field of Latin Americanism (and vice versa) is overdue. Hoyos also strikes a productive balance between close readings of specific novels and other media artifacts and discussion of theoretical and socio-historical issues. He certainly packs in more ideas in each chapter than is typical of studies that provide close readings of individual texts. There are a few moments, however, when the critic’s enthusiasm for ideas leads him to terminology that is vague and undertheorized. Such is the case with the notion of “world consciousness” and its synonyms “consciousness of the world as a whole” (2, 20), “planetary-collective memory” (59) and even “globality” (2). An attentive reading of the monograph reveals no real attempt to define these terms (although there are notes pointing the reader to the “World Literature” movement); as is, the terms add little to the discussion beyond an airy utopianism. One other term that deserves more fleshing out is the concept of the Aleph. While the term does work well as an image for the kind of novel that Hoyos is interested in examining, the critic misses an opportunity early on to complicate the notion. A closer reading of Borges’s short story might have brought out the narrator’s deeply suspicious attitude towards global literature, at least in the form of the monumental poem written by the Aleph’s discoverer, Carlos Argentino Daneri. “El poema se titulaba *La Tierra*; tratábase de una descripción del planeta, en la que no faltaban, por cierto, la pintoresca digresión y el gallardo apóstrofe” [The poem was titled *The Earth*; it was a description of the planet, in which, of course, there was no lack of picturesque digressions and striking apostrophes] (619; my translation). Daneri reads “Borges” a bit of the poem and follows each segment with his own gloss of its meaning and worth, much as Dante did in *La Vita Nuova* (many have commented on the Daneri-Dante connection). The

description of the poem and its author is hilarious, in the dryly-comedic Borgesian manner. This cannot negate, however, the fact that Borges's own prose has become part of World Literature and that we can see the Aleph, hidden in a basement in Buenos Aires, as an image of that creative and peripheral (creative *because* it is peripheral) perspective that Borges lauds in "El escritor argentino y la tradición" [The Argentine Writer and the Tradition]. But "The Aleph" is a slippery text (as are most of Borges's best stories), and Hoyos could and probably should have mentioned the narrator's relief as he began to forget his vision of the Aleph, his indifference to the destruction of Daneri's home which housed the Aleph, and his theory that Daneri's Aleph was a fake (the authentic one being perhaps in a pillar in the mosque of Amr in Cairo). All of these complications would not have devalued Hoyos's use of the Aleph image; on the contrary, discussion of them would have enriched this otherwise excellent monograph.

Works Cited

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Obras completas: 1923-1972*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974.