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Mestizaje, Transculturation, Heterogeneity

It could be said that the category of *mestizaje* is the most powerful and widespread conceptual device with which Latin America has interpreted itself, although perhaps its capacity to offer self-identifying images is at this time less penetrating than it used to be a few decades ago, and even though it cannot be forgotten that throughout history it has not ceased to elicit dissimilar but almost always radical and even apocalyptic inquiries (from Guamán Poma de Ayala to some positivists). It seems clear to me, however, that a salvational ideology of *mestizaje* and *mestizo* people has prevailed and still does prevail as a conciliating synthesis of the many mixtures that constitute the social and cultural Latin American corpus. After all, it is not by accident that here in Latin America a mythical image could be so successfully conceived, like that of the “cosmic race,” which is the hymnal exacerbation of some sort of *supermestizaje* and also the legitimizing reason for the Latin American condition.

It is useless to list the innumerable uses of the *mestizo* category (and its derivatives) in order to explain Latin American literature. It is useless because they are very well known and also (and I hope not to be unfair or forgetful) because in no case has there been a consistent effort to define with a certain theoretical rigor what a “*mestizo* literature” implies. I fear that in large part there has been a certain anxiety to find some sort of *locus amoenus* in which at least two of the greatest sources of Latin America, the Hispanic and the Indian, were harmonically reconciled, although in certain regions, as in the Caribbean, aspects of African origin would obviously be included. Naturally, this yearning is neither warranted nor does it cloister itself within the literary space: its true sphere is that of the strenuous and endless processes of the formation of nations internally fractured since the Spanish conquest. To assume that there is a non-

conflictive meeting point seems to be the necessary condition to think of and imagine the nation as a more or less harmonious and coherent whole, a point which continues to be a curious a priori in order to conceive (even against the painful evidence of profound disintegrations) the mere possibility of a “true” nationality. The “mestizo literature” would express as much as it would contribute to the shaping of this synthesis, whose expression—it is almost necessary to say it—is inextricably tied to the question of regional and/or national “identity.” In this respect, the social construction of Inca Garcilaso’s work and persona provides a conclusive example.

I presume that the debate over the term “mestizo literature” should provide, or maybe not, an effectively theoretical alternative. This explains why my first question-proposal consists of arguing whether the category of *transculturation*—either the Fernando Ortiz and Angel Rama versions or any other version—is the theoretical device that offers a reasonable epistemological base to the concept (which I consider mostly intuitive) of *mestizaje*, or involves, on the contrary, a distinct epistemological proposal. Although I have used this category many times, I believe it is the former case. *Transculturation* would imply, in the long run, the construction of a syncretic plane that finally incorporates in a more or less unproblematical totality (in spite of the conflictive character of the process) two or more languages, two or more ethnic identities, two or more aesthetic codes and historical experiences. I add that this synthesis would be configured in the space of the hegemonic culture and literature; that at times the social asymmetry of the originating contacts would be obviated; and finally, that the discourses that have not influenced the system of “enlightened” literature would be left at the margins. At the same time, it is undeniable that the concept of *transculturation* is much more sophisticated than that of *mestizaje*, and that it has an outstanding hermeneutical aptitude, as is made evident in Rama’s own work.

If *transculturation* effectively implied the (dialectical?) resolution of differences in a synthesis able to overcome the originating contradictions (which is arguable), then another theoretical device would have to be formulated in order to explain sociocultural situations and discourses in which the dynamics of the multiple intercrossings do not operate in a syncretic way, but instead emphasize conflicts and alterities. First, it would be necessary to contemplate Néstor García Canclini’s category of *hybridity*, which does not obviate syncretic instances but de-emphasizes and situates them in a precarious situational temporality that destroys them as soon as they are instated: “strategies for entering and leaving modernity.” It would also be appropriate to discuss my proposal on *heterogene-*

ity, which would define vast sectors of Latin American literature. Although sometimes I went beyond the literary sphere, the truth is that my postulates were always conceived from and for literature (which is without a doubt one of their most obvious limitations). In its first version, the concept of heterogeneity attempted to clarify the nature of processes of discursive production in which at least one of the instances differed from the others, with respect to its social, cultural, and ethnical affiliation. Later, I “radicalized” my idea and proposed that each of these instances is internally heterogeneous. It is obvious that categories like those of intertext (or better, interdiscourse, to avoid problems relative to the crossing of orality and writing) or dialogism (in terms of M. M. Bakhtin not every dialogue is dialectical) would allow for the refining of this perspective. It is also obvious that it is necessary to reexamine the complex historical condition of heterogeneity: discontinuous discourses are generated within heterogeneous stratifications that, in a certain way, fragment and hierarchize history, as José María Arguedas’s reformulation of the myths of Huarochirí in *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*, for example, demonstrates. Naturally, it will be indispensable to compare all these categories with the concept of “alternative literature” recently proposed by Martín Lienhard. Besides its many important qualities, I believe that this proposal enriches the debate over emphasizing the significance of multilingualism, diglossia, and, what is perhaps more decisive, the rejection or assimilation of orality and writing.

Beneath these intercultural dynamics remains the fact—which also should certainly be a topic of reflection and debate—of the historical and spatial coexistence of up-to-a-point autonomous “literary” systems. I think that today very few critics would exclude literatures in Quechua, Aymara, or Amazon languages from the national space of Andean literatures, but it seems to me that concerning this question, many grave problems are still unsolved. It is impossible to even state them, but I imagine that they all converge more or less directly on the conception of a “national literature,” or an Andean literature, either in singular or plural. In the latter case, it would become indispensable to figure out the modes of relation (if there were any) between one system (for example, oral literature in Quechua) and another (the “cultured” literature in Spanish, if be the case). At some point regarding this question I advanced the hypothesis that the entirety of these literary systems would form a “contradictory totality,” but I continue without exactly knowing how such a category would work.

Be it as it may, the essential question consists of producing theoretical and methodological devices sufficiently rigorous and sophisticated in or-

der to better understand a literature (or more broadly, a vast gamut of discourses) whose evident multiplicity generates a copious, profound, and disturbing conflictiveness. Assuming it as such, making contradiction the object of our discipline can be the most urgent task of Latin American critical thought. Something, of course, that would have to be debated.

Translated by Christopher Dennis