

¿Cien Años de Qué?

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What a remarkable occasion for a pan-American literary conference at a Spanish university: the centennial of the Spanish-American War and of Spain's consequent loss of her last American colonies; the end of her enormous empire, which, as the British historian Hugh Thomas recently declared, "in its duration and cultural influence... overshadows the empires of Britain, France, Holland, Belgium, and even Russia".

At first one might wonder, Why commemorate such an historical setback with a literary conference? But then one remembers that when a newspaper reporter once asked William Faulkner what, in his opinion, accounted for the impressive literary flowering of the North American Southland after our Civil War, Faulkner replied: "We lost." And does not Homer somewhere remark ironically that «Wars are fought so that poets will have something to sing about»? Perhaps we can revise that *obiter dictum* to read "Wars are *lost* so that" etc. Clearly, the aphorism applies with particular poignancy to Spain after 1898. I shall return to it after expressing my gratitude to this university, to the Fulbright Commission, and to the organizers of this conference for providing my wife and me with an occasion to revisit España: a country for which we share a longstanding affection; a country that we have visited a number of times over the decades, and that has been of some importance to me as a writer of fiction.

Indeed, for reasons that I shall presently make clear, one of my tentative titles for this talk was "One Hundred Years of Gratitude" (*Cien Años de Gratitud*: The rhyme with *solitude* works in English, though not in Spanish). Reflecting upon the literary activity in North and South America since 1898 and upon literary relations between the two continents as well, I also considered "One Hundred Years of Plenitude." But then, shaking my head at some unfortunate aspects of our *political* relations through that period, I thought perhaps "One Hundred Years of Turpitude" might be more appropriate. (Do we have the word *turpitud* en español? No? We certainly have it in English.) And then, considering what my more knowledgeable friends tell me of the vigor and diversity of contemporary *Spanish* literature, I considered "The (Re)Generation of Ninety-Eight; or, Forget the *Maine!*" To this subject, too — I mean the infamous event that triggered the Spanish-American War — I shall return.

What a formidable *cien años* ours has been! As a novelist, I make occasional

use of what are called in English "time lines": those reference books and computer software programs that attempt to show, like an orchestral concert score, what was happening more or less simultaneously in various fields in various parts of the world at particular periods of history. To look back upon the closing years of the nineteenth century and at the year 1898 in particular with the help of these time lines is to be impressed by their *busyness*, by their sheer activity in just about every area of human endeavor, and by what their remarkable accomplishments can now be seen to have portended for the century that followed. Perhaps the same could be said of virtually any decade in recent centuries if one examines it through the lens of hindsight; but just consider: The years 1890 through 1899 gave us the Nobel prizes and the modern Olympic games; Social Darwinism, the Dreyfus Affair, Gobineau's "scientific" racism, and the Klondike Gold Rush. They saw the triumph of Europe's colonization of Africa (except for Ethiopia and Liberia) and the final suppression of our North American Indians at the battle of Wounded Knee, along with our westward expansion into the new states of Idaho, Wyoming, and Utah. They gave us the Sino-Japanese War and the Cuban Revolution and Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee; they gave us the first cinema and the first comic strip; they gave us the discovery of radioactivity and the invention of wireless telegraphy, the diesel engine, the automobile, electromagnetic sound recording, rocket propulsion, synthetic fibers, electric subways, the clothing zipper, the safety razor, and the "safety bicycle". They gave us Frazer's *Golden Bough* and Freud's *Studien über Hysterie* and Havelock Ellis's *Psychopathia Sexualis*; Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (Volume 3) and Bergson's *Matiere et Memoire* and Herzl's *Der Judenstaat* and John Dewey's *School and Society*. It was the decade of Post-Impressionism and Art Nouveau; of Debussy and Puccini and Richard Strauss and Sibelius and Mahler and Massenet; of Chekhov and Dario and young Yeats and old Tolstoy, of Ibsen and Shaw and Conrad and Henry James and Machado de Assis.

As for our "baseline" year: The time-lines tell us that 1898 saw the opening of the Paris Metro, the construction of Count Zeppelin's first dirigible, the discovery of radium and xenon and neon and the dysentery bacillus, and the first successful photography with artificial light. In China, the Boxer Rebellion against Western influences began. Bismarck and Gladstone died that year; so did Lewis Carroll and Stefan Mallarmé. On the other hand, Bertolt Brecht and Ernest Hemingway were born (as was my mother), and, if my obstretrical arithmetic is correct, both Jorge Luis Borges and Vladimir Nabokov were conceived in 1898. Zola's "*J'Accuse*" was published that year, as were Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* and Knut Hamsun's *Victory* and H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* and Oscar Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol* and Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* and Huysman's *La Cathédrale*.

All very impressive and rich in promise. But then we reflect upon the staggering century that followed — two world wars and abundant smaller but also dreadful ones; poison gas, automatic weapons, aerial bombing, nuclear and biological weapons; totalitarianism and massacre on an unprecedented scale, despite which

our species overruns and despoils the planet and its atmosphere, et cetera ad nauseam — and I am reminded of a cartoon in our *New Yorker* magazine a few years ago: Our astronauts have landed on a beautiful, verdant new planet, a virtual paradise; indeed, as they step out of their space vehicle they see in the near distance a fruit tree, under which stand a man and a woman, naked; there is a serpent in the tree; the woman holds an apple in her hand, from which she seems about to take a bite — and one of the astronauts runs toward her, shouting «Wait!» Looking back at the time lines for the pre-dawn of this century, I feel like that astronaut: “!Cuidado! ¡Un momento, por dios!”

Too late: *Consummatum est*, or almost so — for who knows what may yet happen to us in the small remaining interval between today and the next century, not to mention what *that* century may have in store for us?

Cien años de plenitud; cien años de turpitud (I'll use the word, even though it doesn't exist in Spanish and doesn't rhyme with *soledad*). As for *gratitud*... well: In the face of our century's human catastrophes — the hundreds of millions of victims of militant nationalism and colonialism, of ideology in general and totalitarianism in particular — one feels that there is something unseemly, perhaps even obscene, about reviewing its *positive* accomplishments in science, technology, and the arts, including the Hundred Years of Literary Plenitude that inspired this conference: the century of *modernismo* and of Modernism; of Postmodernism and Magic Realism and *El Boom*. As if, for example, the scientific and cultural enrichment of the United States (and the world) by refugees from European Fascism and Russian Communism — by Albert Einstein and Thomas Mann and Pablo Casals and Vladimir Nabokov and dozens of others in every field, including my own Johns Hopkins professors Leo Spitzer and Pedro Salinas — as if their achievements somehow mitigate the evils that they fled! Or, to come closer to home, as if, in some humanistic double-entry bookkeeping, Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* can somehow be balanced against the *Guernica* of Francisco Franco. Something obscene, I say, about that. And yet...

And yet, since *Guernica* was destroyed in any case, we are surely no *worse* off for having Picasso's rendition of that atrocity to contemplate in Madrid. If, in Ezra Pound's bitter formulation, all that the ravages of history have left to us of classical Greece and Rome are “a gross of broken statues and a fewscore battered books”, then we are not only no *worse* off for having those souvenirs; we would be considerably worse off if we *didn't* have them, much as we may lament what was lost in the Christian Dark Ages, for example.

Consider the case of my compatriot Raymond Federman, an avant-garde North American writer and my former university colleague: Born in Paris to a family of modest French-Jewish tailors, Federman was destined to be apprenticed to his father's trade; but when the Nazis invaded France, he and his family were

rounded up along with most other French Jews and shipped off to the death camps. Young Raymond and some other boys in his boxcar managed to escape almost accidentally before the train crossed the border; he made his way somehow to the south of France, where he worked as a farm laborer while his family and the rest of European Jewry were being exterminated in the Holocaust. Ultimately and fortunately he got himself to the USA, where he was able to finish high school, attend Columbia University, complete a doctorate in French literature at the University of California, and become a respected American university professor and experimental writer instead of a small-time Parisian neighborhood tailor. "So what am I supposed to do?" Raymond once asked me: "Thank Hitler?"

Well, no, of course not. If we could magically undo the Holocaust by giving up the collected works of Raymond Federman, I am quite sure that even the author would consent. William Faulkner, whom I've quoted already, once made the casually cruel remark that one poem by John Keats is worth "any number of old ladies." One would like to have asked him, *Any* number? Six million, for example? Or perhaps just a mere handful, but including your own mother and grandmother? Fortunately for us, history doesn't offer such options — at least not to most of us — and so we are free to be grateful for Raymond Federman and Anne Frank and Primo Levi without having to be grateful to Adolf Hitler. We can thank Vladimir Nabokov for his beautiful novels in English without thanking Lenin and Stalin for dispossessing him of pre-Revolutionary Russia. Muchas gracias, Pablo Picasso y Pablo Casals; no gracias necessary to the Generalissimo. And (to circle back toward my subject) I can thank Professor Pedro Salinas for leading us ignorant undergraduate gringos through *Don Quijote* and *Lazarillo de Tormes* and Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca and Unamuno and Ortega y Gasset without thanking the Loyalistas for driving Salinas into American exile.

Indeed, on the assumption that I have by now made my position clear enough not to be mistaken for Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss, I am tempted to return to 1898, as follows: Even the United States Navy, I understand, has come virtually to admit that the explosion that sank our battleship *U.S.S. Maine* in Havana Harbor at 9:40 PM on 15 February 1898 and killed 268 of its crew was almost certainly caused not by a Spanish anti-ship mine but by an accidental fire in the vessel's coal bunkers, next to its reserve gunpowder magazines. Our own distinguished Admiral Hyman Rickover, commander of the US nuclear submarine fleet, came to that conclusion in his official reinvestigation of the matter in 1976; Rickover's report (which our government in general and our Navy in particular received with loud silence) confirmed what Spanish investigators had been saying all along. But ah, my friends: If the powerful U.S. newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst, along with President McKinley's hyper-macho assistant secretary of the Navy, Theodore Roosevelt, had not seized that opportunity to whip up American war hysteria with their cry "Remember the *Maine*!" there would have been no Spanish-American War to deprive Spain of its last colonies in the Western Hemisphere, and hence no

Generacion de Noventa y Ocho, and hence perhaps a different set of historical circumstances in Spain from those that led to the Guerra Civil and Franco's dictatorship, and hence no exile for the likes of Pedro Salinas (first in Puerto Rico, then in the USA), and hence no quietly inspiring exemplar for this particular 18-year-old Yankee fumbling his way toward a literary vocation: the first living, breathing writer of any sort, not to mention the first bonafide internationally distinguished poet, whom I had ever been in the gentle, dignified, good-humored presence of.

Candide asks his friend Martin, "For what purpose was the world formed?"

"To infuriate us," Martin replies. Also, I would add, to dismay and humble us with its staggering contingencies, both general and specific: Had it not been for the anti-Semitic pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe and the relative poverty of village life in Germany toward the end of the 19th century, my wife's grandparents would not have immigrated to America from Minsk and Latvia and my grandparents from Sachsen-Altenburg, and she and I would not exist, much less have met each other. If not for a certain snowstorm in Boston at the end of the 1960s, we would not have re-met in romantic and happily consequential circumstances. A different sort of spontaneous combustion aboard the U.S.S. *Maine* in 1898 may be imagined to have led to my reading *Don Quijote* en español with Pedro Salinas in Baltimore fifty years ago and, thanks in part to that fortuitous experience, to my subsequent evolution into a novelist sufficiently attracted to things Iberian and Iberian-American to be powerfully affected by Joaquim Machado de Assis at the beginning of my career and by Jorge Luis Borges at its midpoint, and to visit Spain and Portugal (if not Brazil and Argentina) at every opportunity. Therefore, while I regret the death of those 268 U.S. Navy personnel aboard the *Maine* and the later casualties on both sides in Theodore Roosevelt's "splendid little war", not to mention the horrors of the Guerra Civil, it bemuses me to think of my *obras todavía no completas* as part of the fallout from — shall we say — *el boom* of 15 February 1898.

Speaking of *El Boom* — that literary phenomenon so impressive that it prompted my comrade William H. Gass to declare not long ago that we Yanquis "no longer own the Novel; we just rent it from South America" — I must confess that although I would not go quite *that far* in my admiration for all those wonderful writers, it is the case that whereas Iberia (especially Spain) has been of perhaps more interest and importance to me than its contemporary literature has been, Iberian-American literature from Machado de Assis to García Márquez has been, perhaps regrettably, of more interest and importance to me than have been the countries of its origin — or at least of its authors' origins, inasmuch as a considerable percentage of *El Boom* was detonated in either voluntary or involuntary expatriation. Reading Cervantes with Salinas made me yearn to come to Spain as soon as possible, and as soon as possible thereafter (on my first sabbatical leave from teaching) I came, even though in 1963 *el patriarca* was still in his long *otoño*, and the scars of the Guerra Civil, both physical and human, were still quite in evidence. Reading

Machado and Borges and García Márquez, on the other hand — and Allende, Cortázar, Donoso, Fuentes, Piñon, Puig, Vargas Llosa, et cetera almost ad infinitum — seems *not* to have inspired me with any comparable craving to visit the locales of their excellent fiction, any more than reading Franz Kafka makes me yearn for the Czech Republic or reading William Gass impels me toward the American midwest.

No offense intended, comrades — and, after all, if I had in fact traveled to Chile, Argentina, Peru, Colombia, or Cuba in search of you, as I came to Spain in search of Cervantes, I would have found many of you not at home, whereas here in Spain I encounter Don Miguel or his characters again and again. I have sat at what is supposed to have been his writing-desk in Valladolid, and I have drunk deep from the little water fountain in his courtyard there. And I have, in fact, had the privilege of meeting and conversing with Jorge Luis Borges, José Donoso, Manuel Puig, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Nelida Piñon, for example — not on their home grounds, however, but on mine, as guests of my university or as fellow conferees at other US universities.

And here I shall digress for a moment from my expression of *gratitudo* for all this literary *plenitudo* in order to praise our Yanqui university system as an indispensable facilitator of cultural interaction. It was in our universities, after all, that the likes of Einstein and Spitzer and Salinas and Nabokov found supportive sanctuary, and that the likes of Borges and Donoso and Fuentes and Vargas Llosa found their most appreciative North American audiences (my daughter, for example, was able to sit in for a whole semester on Carlos Fuentes's lecture-course at Harvard called "Time and the Novel" — a course that I would gladly have attended myself). Moreover, whatever one might think of the peculiar Yankee phenomenon in the second half of this century of university programs in "creative writing" (the last time I counted, there were more than 400 such degree-granting programs in my country) and the related phenomenon of novelists and poets as university professors — a phenomenon about which I myself have mixed feelings, although I have been one of its grateful beneficiaries — it cannot be doubted that two generations of apprentice writers in the United States have thereby been enabled and encouraged not only to read and study such writers as *los Boomeros*, but in many cases to hear and meet and speak and even work with them. My own apprentices at Johns Hopkins, for instance, were thus exposed and introduced to all of those writers whom I mentioned a moment ago — and one interesting consequence of this contact is that they sometimes asked our distinguished visitors questions that I myself would have considered undiplomatic, although I listened with interest to the replies. Thus for example during Jorge Luis Borges's last visit to Johns Hopkins in 1984, we were all disappointed that the old fellow had been passed over once again for the Nobel Prize, but of course none of us mentioned that subject to him — until one of our students asked him publicly how he felt about being passed over once again for the Nobel Prize. While we blushed with embarrassment, Borges himself merely smiled as if happy to have been asked that question, and then replied, "Well, you know, I have been on their short

list for so many years now that I suspect that they think that they've already *given me the prize*". ¡Olé, Jorge! And why did Manuel Puig choose the epistolary form for his novel *Heartbreak Tango*? Because (so he mischievously declared to my students when one of them asked him that question) he had been working for so long as an airline ticket-clerk in New York City that he had lost confidence in his Spanish; in the epistolary mode, he reasoned, any mistakes in his spelling, grammar, or punctuation would be attributed to the fictional authors of the letters. ¡Bravo, Manuel!

Et cetera. And of course, like any young artists in any medium, these university apprentice writers must undoubtedly have sometimes found from their exposure to such eminent visitors and their works the sort of navigational assistance that I myself found in the works of Machado de Assis and Borges. Just recently, for example, I picked up a new novel by one of our alumnae from the Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars — a novel called *The Antelope Wife*, by Louise Erdrich — and I read its marvelous opening passage, called "A Father's Milk", in which a US cavalry troop in the 1880s slaughters a village of Ojibwa Indians (Ms. Erdrich herself is of half Ojibwa and half German ancestry). One of the soldiers, for reasons that he himself does not understand, deserts his company in mid-massacre, rescues an Indian baby girl, and flees with her into the wilderness. Unable to feed her or to silence her crying, in desperation he puts the infant to his own breast, which she suckles with fierce contentment but without nourishment — until, mirabile dictu, "half asleep one early morning [with] her beside him, he felt a slight warmth, then a rush in one side of his chest, a pleasurable burning. He thought it was an odd dream and fell asleep again only to wake to a huge burp from the baby, whose lips curled back... in bliss, who... looked, impossibly, well fed... He put his hand to his chest and then tasted a thin blue drop of his own watery, appalling, God-given milk." The renegade soldier believes that his breast-milk has come from God; *my* strong suspicion is that although North American Indian cultures have their own sorts of Magic Realism, this particular miraculous lactation came from Ms. Erdrich via Gabriel García Márquez, whose fiction she would certainly have been exposed to, and was perhaps nourished by, during her apprenticeship at Johns Hopkins.

I wonder whether that benign and nourishing *leche de padre* flows in both directions. Have any young Latin-American writers been inspired by the likes of Flannery O'Connor, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon, Grace Paley, John Hawkes, Philip Roth, or Toni Morrison? I don't know. I do know that it pleased me a few years ago to hear Sr. García Márquez acknowledge Hemingway and Faulkner to have been "[his] masters"; and even more to hear him remark (in an interview in the *Harvard Advocate*) that Faulkner "is really, you know, a Caribbean writer" — an observation that certainly gave me a fresh perspective on the sage of Oxford, Mississippi. Here is a conspicuous instance of a great writer "creating his own precursors", as Borges said with respect to Franz Kafka: One reads Faulkner somewhat differently after reading *Cien Años de Soledad*. Even a few such seminal exchanges (excuse the expression; "seminal exchanges" comes more

naturally to me than “father’s milk”) may suffice for cultural cross-fertilization. If there are traces of Faulkner in the literary DNA of Gabriel García Márquez, then no literary paternity suits should be filed by chauvinistic critics who see Magic Realism in Toni Morrison and Louise Erdrich.

And after all, we are speaking here of admiration and inspiration, not of international trade balances. 20th-century Modernist and Postmodernist fiction owe much to Ireland, for example, for giving us James Joyce and Samuel Beckett; but Joyce’s and Beckett’s own navigation-stars were from all over the literary firmament, and so it’s futile and pointless to try to calculate cultural trade deficits and surpluses — all the more so when we bear in mind that a writer’s navigation-stars are not to be confused with his or her destination. Forty-five years ago, the brilliant novels of Joaquim Machado de Assis helped me to find my own first voice as a novelist. But much of what I borrowed from Machado to write *The Floating Opera*, Machado had borrowed in turn from Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, which I had not yet discovered for myself at that time, and which anyhow might not have had the impact on me that it did when reorchestrated by Machado’s Romantic pessimism. A dozen years later, Jorge Luis Borges’s *Ficciones* inspired me to imagine the possibilities of a Literature of Exhausted Possibility and what came later to be called Postmodernist fiction; but Borges’s own navigation-stars were chiefly English, from Beowulf through G. K. Chesterton and Robert Louis Stevenson. Apollo be praised for such happy cross-cultural miscegenation!

Perhaps this mixed metaphor — international trade balances, celestial navigation, and DNA analysis — is itself a metaphor for my point: I have steered my own writerly course by the various lights of Faulkner, Joyce, Machado, and Borges, not to mention Cervantes, Boccaccio, Rabelais, and Scheherazade; my muse’s DNA, like that of most writers, is a mestizo smorgasbord of these and many other literary-ethnic inputs, and while I freely acknowledge my debt to them and to the assorted literary traditions that produced them, it is not the sort of debit that requires repayment. My books, whatever their worth, are my only intercultural bookkeeping. If, on some literary-critical balance sheet, those books show a net cultural deficit to Ireland, Brazil, Argentina, Spain, Italy, France, and medieval Araby, that debit is a debt merely of gratitude. And of gratitude I have a plenitude: if not yet quite *cien años de*, at least *cincuenta años de gratitud*.

Thank you; *muchas gracias*; et cetera.