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Excerpt

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Journalism, modernity, and narrative fiction in Spanish America

We are more concerned . . . with the question of whether a history of an entity as self-contradictory as literature is conceivable. In the present state of literary studies this possibility is far from being clearly established. It is generally admitted that a positivistic history of literature, treating it as if it were a collection of empirical data, can only be a history of what literature is not. . . . On the other hand, the intrinsic interpretation of literature claims to be anti- or ahistorical, but often presupposes a notion of history of which the critic is not himself aware.

Paul de Man, "Literary History and Literary
Modernity"

Which of us is writing this page I don't know.

Jorge Luis Borges, "Borges and I"

In the heady days of the student protests that led to the massacre at Tiananmen Square in China in 1989, a telling indication of how much circumstances seemed to be changing in the direction the student leaders wanted was the sudden lifting of curbs on the press, as Chinese print and electronic journalists were for the first time able to report with considerable freedom on the social upheaval.¹ Such freedom was promptly crushed, as was the student uprising, but its brief flowering, in the midst of a student-led rebellion demanding that China's modernization be sociopolitical as well as economic, served as a reminder of journalism's deep and perennial link to modernity.

To all Spanish Americans, particularly to Mexicans and those familiar with Mexico, the Tiananmen repression must have brought back ironic memories of a similar event: the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre, when hundreds of people demonstrating for greater freedom of expression were gunned down in the

Plaza of the Three Cultures in central Mexico City. The irony in those memories must surely come from the fact that, whereas the Chinese protests were broadcast live via satellite around the world, the events at Tlatelolco went almost unreported at the time by the government-coopted Mexican press. The absence of the media at the Tlatelolco events was as significant as their presence at the Chinese events. The lack of reporting by the media prompted an impassioned response by Mexican writers, and soon essays, poems, and testimonial narratives by such authors as Octavio Paz, José Emilio Pacheco, Rosario Castellanos, and Elena Poniatowska poured forth to investigate, denounce, and reflect on the tragedy. If Tiananmen reminds us of the abiding connection between journalism and modernity, Tlatelolco and its aftermath underscore the unique intensity and volatility of the relationships among modernity, nationhood, journalism, and literature in Spanish America.

The concept of “modernity” is a complex and highly charged one that has been much debated of late, particularly in regard to the possible existence of a “postmodernity.” For my purposes, I regard modernity as both a definite historical period and an all-encompassing cultural phenomenon. First of all, modernity is the name given to the profound socioeconomic, political, cultural, and technological changes that began in Western Europe at the end of the eighteenth century and have subsequently been disseminated over much of the world. As a sociohistorical concept it encompasses, among other things, capitalism and its discontents, representative government, and a belief in the transformative power of technology. But it also implies a deep cultural shift with regard to previous modes of being: In the cultural sphere, modernity is linked to change, to renewal, to the twin ideas of progress and decadence, to historicism, to criticism, and to the presumed provisional character of all socioeconomic and political structures.²

I furthermore agree with those who have argued that Spanish America – as a political and cultural ideal, if not as an accomplished fact – is both a source and a product of modernity.³ The key role played by the New World in the origins of the modern age in Europe has already been amply documented; less recognized is the fact that the struggle for Spanish America’s independence in the early nineteenth century was an at-

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tempt by the Creole elites to bring modernity to their native lands. Literary works as diverse as Andrés Bello's *Silva a la agricultura de la zona tórrida* (1823) and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo, o Civilización y barbarie* (1854) attest that the Creoles' nation-building during the independence period was intended to bring Spanish America in line with the letter – if not always the spirit – of modernity.

A product of the modern age, Spanish America has always had a problematical relation to modernity. Throughout the nineteenth century, the modern spirit of the incipient Spanish American bourgeoisie came face to face with an archaic and threatening reality that was usually represented in Romantic texts by the forces of Nature – impenetrable jungles, endless plains – but which in fact was only the legacy of the systems of production of the Colonial period.⁴ From the time of the wars of independence the young Creole bourgeoisie, although anxious to reproduce upon American soil the ideological, aesthetic, and economic novelties of Europe, was faced with the question of what to do with the great masses of Indians, peons, and slaves, who were barely acculturated and lacked the necessary training to perform the complicated tasks of the new industries. Unwilling to regard these people as their countrymen and to grant them even a few basic freedoms, the Creoles were unable to transform them into the disciplined, docile, and educated work force needed to fuel an industrial revolution. Against this background occurred the struggles of Simón Bolívar against the plainsmen of Boves, the conflict between Unitarians and Federalists in Argentina, and the desperate tug-of-war of the Cuban sugar barons with the very system of slave labor on which their sugar mills depended.⁵ It was, broadly speaking, the struggle of “civilization” against a “barbarism” on which the former ultimately depended, and which it must exploit like just another natural resource in order to survive.⁶ Spanish American modernity appears, then, as the product of a will to power, of a violence that must be exerted and renewed periodically upon a milieu that actively or passively rejects it.

The violence exerted by modernity was, at least in part, that of the pen. Following an age-old Western tradition, the Spanish American ruling class adopted representation – particularly written representation – as an important weapon in its arsenal.

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However, unable to successfully transplant modern systems of production, the Spanish American elite instead imported new modes of representation, naively hoping to find the solution to its problems in the critical spirit fostered by the latter. Thus, throughout the nineteenth century there arose a succession of discourses that dealt not so much with the question of the existence of a Spanish American modernity as with the possibility of its actualization in Spanish America. One of these discourses was that of historiography and political analysis, embodied in wide-ranging works of Romantic erudition such as Lucas Alamán's *Disertaciones sobre la historia de México* (1844–52) and the Cuban José Antonio Saco's *Historia de la esclavitud* (1875–92). Another was what we may broadly call “literature”: This category includes a variety of works which obliquely reflected the modernizing project, from the patriotic odes of the independence period that constituted, in Rubén Darío's dyspeptic judgment, “an eternal song to Junín, an unending ode to the agriculture of the torrid zone” (*Obras completas*, I: 206), to profoundly meditated and anguished texts such as Esteban Echeverría's “El matadero” (written in 1839, but published in 1871), Sarmiento's *Facundo*, and Cirilo Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdés* (1879). Still another discourse, certainly not the least important, was that of journalism, embodied in the myriad ephemeral publications (broadsheets, pamphlets, journals, dailies) that proliferated after independence and in some cases went on to become, later in the nineteenth century, powerful shapers of public opinion.

Since I will be speaking throughout the rest of this book about the two discourses of literature and journalism, some definitions are in order. With regard to literature, I agree with Tzvetan Todorov's view that the attempt to define it as a specific type of discourse is a questionable enterprise (*The Poetics of Prose*, p. 1). Todorov prefers to dissolve “the opposition between literature and nonliterature” into “a typology of discourses” (p. 11). Nevertheless, ever since its inception in the nineteenth century, “literature” is a notion which has refused to disappear. It is clearly a term that encapsulates certain ideals of textual production deeply rooted in modern writers, most notably those of linguistic autonomy and self-referentiality – what Foucault has called the “radical intransitivity” of language (*Les mots et les*

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choses, p. 313) – and the vision of the writer as an intellectual aristocrat (Kernan, “The Idea of Literature,” p. 38–9). Although I share Todorov’s basic belief that “literature” is a historically determined concept and that “discourse” is a more useful category with which to reflect on textual phenomena (p. 11), I will occasionally invoke the former term, particularly as my analysis draws closer to our era, because texts written in more recent times often presuppose literature’s existence as part of their textual ideology.

And what do I mean by “journalism”? Similar caveats apply to this concept, with one distinction: In my view, unlike literature, journalism’s use of language has been sufficiently formalized and regulated throughout history to warrant considering journalism a type of discourse, albeit one that has been substantially reformulated over the years (I have more to say about this later in this chapter). The term “journalism” is used today to refer in general to “the activity of gathering and disseminating news” (Stephens, p. 3n), but it was not used in its current sense until the late eighteenth century,⁷ and the forms this activity has taken have historically been quite diverse: letters, newsbooks, news ballads, gazettes, etc. The very notion of “news” is subject to debate. For instance, what is “new” in “news”? When does “news” begin to shade off into history? In eighteenth-century England, the Stamp Act, which attempted to tax newspapers, led eventually to a pragmatic, legal definition of “news” as “a narrative of public events supplied by the posts and under one month old” (Davis, p. 99). Obviously, such arbitrary deadlines do little to solve the underlying philosophical problem of time: how to define the present. Nevertheless, however “the present” is understood, terms such as “journalism” or “the press,” like the term “literature,” have clearly come to encompass certain ideals of textual production. In the case of journalism, these ideals are constantly evolving and have often been in opposition to those of literature: Specifically, journalism insists on language’s utilitarian aspect – particularly its subordination to the laws of the market, to money – and on language’s transitivity, its transparency as a medium through which information is conveyed as objectively as possible. Needless to say, the journalistic ideal of linguistic transparency and objectivity has often been contradicted by journalism’s use as a vehicle for

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propaganda and polemic. This has been particularly true in Spanish America, and is an important element in the definition of “journalism” in that particular context, as will be seen later in this chapter.

I wish to make clear from the outset that although I sometimes refer to the relationship between literature and journalism in terms of an antagonism or an opposition, I am using such binary distinctions as shorthand for a far more complex situation. In the lexicon of chaos theory (which seems particularly germane in this case, see below), I view both literature and journalism as dynamic systems in which other dynamic systems such as writing, commerce, philosophy, and art come together. The same can be said of various categories and generic terms I use throughout this study, such as “narrative,” “narrative fiction,” “novel,” “short story,” etc., including the concept of “discourse” itself. All these terms must be construed, in the abysmal perspective afforded by chaos theory, as ephemeral vortices of signification made up of other vortices. Nevertheless, their unstable, sometimes provisional character does not make them less real or effective: To use a meteorological metaphor, a tornado or a thunderstorm is no less real for being an ephemeral phenomenon. What I propose in this study is a still-crude model of textuality which will hopefully help to answer certain questions, such as: Why have so many Spanish American authors been journalists (as many still are)? Is this situation unusual? Has this had any effect on the various genres of narrative prose in Spanish America, particularly on the novel? Are the allusions to journalism in so many well-known works of Spanish American narrative fiction significant in this regard? And how? I believe the persistence of these questions among critics of Spanish American literature indicates that a relationship of some sort has existed and continues to exist between those two complex phenomena: narrative fiction (some of which is “literary” in today’s terms) and journalism.

Indeed, the link between narrative fiction and journalism is a well-known but little-researched area of Spanish American literary history. This relationship is not exclusive to Spanish America, of course; it is an important element in the literary history of all Western nations, and has been studied, with varying methodologies and degrees of success, with regard to En-

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glish, French, U.S., and Spanish literature.⁸ Nevertheless, satisfactory theoretical works are still lacking on the general literary–historical problem of the interaction between narrative fiction and journalism. Furthermore, aside from scattered but valuable works on such topics as the Spanish American testimonial and documentary narratives, the journalism of Carpentier, García Márquez, and Donoso, and the Modernist newspaper chronicles, no substantial book-length studies have been done on this subject in Spanish America.⁹

As one begins to approach this unusually complex field, three basic theoretical and methodological questions come to mind. First, are there any intrinsic differences between journalism and narrative fiction? Second, if there are, what detectable traces has journalism left in narrative fiction throughout history? And, last, why do fiction writers make use of journalistic discourse and its devices? Needless to say, these questions have no simple answer, and I can only begin to propose some working hypotheses.

In my approach, I use (as noted above) certain terms and concepts advisedly. One such term is “discourse,” which I use not so much in Emile Benveniste’s rather general linguistic definition (“any speech-act supposing a speaker and a listener, and in the speaker an intention to influence the listener in some way,” pp. 208–9) but in a more idiosyncratic usage that derives from Michel Foucault as well as from his critics and commentators such as Hayden White. First and foremost, “discourse” is a broad-ranging category that encompasses the myriad ways in which human language organizes knowledge. Foucault coined this usage because of his distrust, as Mark Philp notes, of “the traditional units of analysis and interpretation – text, oeuvre, and genre – as well as the postulated unities in science – theories, paradigms, and research programmes” (p. 69). “Discourse” is also a concept that moves, that shuttles back and forth (as is suggested by the word’s Latin root, *discurrere*) between other concepts, helping to critically dissolve some and to bring others together. As Hayden White points out,

A discourse moves “to and fro” between received encodings of experience and the clutter of phenomena which refuses incorporation into conventionalized notions of “reality,” “truth,” or “possibility.” It also moves “back and forth” (like a shuttle?) between alternative ways

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of encoding this reality, some of which may be provided by the traditions of discourse prevailing in a given domain of inquiry and others of which may be idiolects of the author, the authority of which he is seeking to establish. Discourse, in a word, is quintessentially a *mediative* enterprise. As such, it is both interpretive and preinterpretive; it is always as much *about* the nature of interpretation itself as it is *about* the subject matter which is the manifest occasion of its own elaboration. (p. 4; italics in original)

Discourse almost never appears in a “pure” and solitary state (save, perhaps, as Foucault suggests, in the speech of madmen [*Histoire de la folie*, p. 39]); instead, it usually appears already subject to the controls and sanctions of society, which considers its free manifestations suspect. “In any society,” Foucault proposes in *L'ordre du discours*, “the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a number of procedures whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to master the unpredictable event . . .” (pp. 10–11). That is why “discourse,” when used as a noun, frequently bears an adjective in front of it, as in the terms “literary discourse” or “journalistic discourse.”

One of the ways in which society seeks to control discourse is by using it as a tool to affect the real world – by turning it into practice, so to speak. Foucault frequently speaks of “discursive formations,” specific discourses that serve as models for real-world institutions (such as hospitals, prisons, churches; or universities) that in turn attempt to regulate human thought and action in terms of the discourses they represent. Needless to say, literature and journalism have not escaped such a process of institutionalization. Throughout the nineteenth century, in salons, cenacles, schools, and “movements,” there was a tendency to gather a multiplicity of textual productions and to standardize certain types of writing under the rubric of “literature,” thus turning literature into a sort of “protodiscourse.” For very different reasons having to do with that activity’s commercial aspect, journalism was also being institutionalized, and with much greater success, to the extent that it truly developed into a discourse – that is, a set of rules governing the display of information. Literature and journalism are both ways in which discourse has been, to a certain extent, mastered and con-

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trolled, although clearly literature has managed to preserve its unruly and unpredictable nature to a far greater extent than journalism.¹⁰

Returning to my first question, it is difficult to say whether there is an intrinsic difference between literature and journalistic discourse. Perhaps it would be better to say that *difference* is at the heart of the link between literature and journalism. A dialectic of difference and resemblance runs through the history of both discourses. For simplicity's sake, I will use narrative fiction as an instance of "literature," although I realize it does not always fit that category. Let us first briefly enumerate the resemblances:

- (1) From a socioliterary standpoint, both journalism and narrative fiction in its most common modern forms – the novel and the short story – are linked to the rise of the bourgeoisie and to the bourgeois insistence on keeping account of facts as well as profits.¹¹
- (2) It is noteworthy that from its beginnings in the early gazettes and journals of late-sixteenth-century Europe, journalistic discourse has adopted or adapted a whole range of genres – letters, dialogues, diaries, *relaciones*, and so forth – which also fall within the purview of narrative fiction. Narrative fiction itself is persistently (some would say, perversely) mimetic, constantly imitating other discourses; thus, we have novels posing as histories, diaries, letters, or journalistic reportages.
- (3) From an ideological perspective, journalism and narrative fiction share the philosophical problematics of empiricism. As Ian Watt has shown, the early picaresque novels and Cervantes' *Quijote* foreshadowed the problematics of empiricism that was later expounded systematically in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and was subsequently taken up by English and French novelists (pp. 9–34). Empiricism is also the hallmark of journalistic discourse, with its insistence on facts over fiction, on information over narration.
- (4) Finally, at the level of rhetoric, Roland Barthes' observations on the presumed difference between historical and fictive discourse are applicable to journalism as well, insofar as journalism attempts to write a "history of the present":

The only feature which distinguishes historical discourse from other kinds is a paradox: the "fact" can exist linguistically only as a term in a discourse, yet we behave as if it were a simple reproduction of something on another plane of existence altogether, some extra-structural "reality." Historical discourse is presumably the only kind which aims

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at a referent “outside” itself that can in fact never be reached. . . . [It is therefore a] fake performative, in which what claims to be the descriptive element is in fact only the expression of the authoritarian nature of that particular speech-act. (“Le discours de l’histoire,” pp. 73, 74)

Both narrative fiction and journalism thrive in a murky rhetorical frontier, an ill-defined territory of mutual borrowings where nothing is quite what it seems. The interaction between them may be more clearly visualized by referring to Jorge Luis Borges’ parable “Borges and I” (1960), in which he evokes the metaphor of the hourglass to represent the process whereby his inner self (the narrative’s “I”) “pours” itself into the literary persona known as “Borges.” However, in its final line (“Which of us is writing this page, I don’t know,” p. 70) the text presents its readers with a conundrum: To which entity do we assign the text we are reading? Since it has already been written, do we simply assign it to “Borges,” the narrator’s literary persona? But, since the narrator stresses the act of writing and the confessional, intimate nature of his discourse, doesn’t the text properly belong to the inner self? Clearly, “Borges and I” exists in a dynamic, shifting region, like the hourglass’s narrow waist, in which it is impossible to say whether the process has ended or still goes on. In a similar fashion, narrative fiction and journalism transfer into their respective spheres elements from each other’s domain; the domains themselves are not difficult to differentiate, but the textual products of their interaction are harder to separate.

Nevertheless, unlike Borges’ hourglass metaphor, which suggests that the discourse of the self “flows” unidirectionally toward that of the literary persona, the situation of narrative fiction and journalism is more complex, since there is a constant back-and-forth movement of elements between both discourses. A less literary but perhaps more precise way to view this situation would be to describe it, in the jargon of chaos theory, as a nonlinear system, that is, as a textual analogue to apparently random, natural, and everyday phenomena such as the weather, the ups and downs of the stock market, the dripping of water from a faucet, or the unpredictable movements of a double-jointed pendulum.¹² The latter phenomenon, as ex-