

# The Foundation of Latin American Literature and its Emergence in World Literature

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The obsession to found new imaginary to Latin American reality and sense of rootlessness bestowed Latin American masters of narratives sense of freedom that traverse imaginary pampa, llano and precolombian ruins without any anxiety of influence of precursor. This essay delves into the relationship of foundation of Latin American literature with the emergence of Latin American literature in World Literature. The crossroads of diachronic literary currents of Latin America with synchronic *World Republic of Letters* will coordinate the topology of its literature in *World Literature*. There are few Western writers that encompass from the genetic origin of Civilizations to apocalyptic sense of an end. Borges and Paz along with García Márquez are questioning the origin of their being at the edge of the West. The literature of the West is one in which major questions must be assumed to have been solved. The characteristic feature of Latin American masters that differentiate with European writers is their obsession of total history. They share the anxiety of beginning along with anxiety of influence. The sense of up-rootness always goes with new foundation for something whether it is positive or negative in any Latin American fables. And they yearn for the revelation of total history whether it is Macondo as in case of García Márquez, poetic revelation searching for the eternal present as in case of Octavio Paz, or fantastic region like Uqbar with different metaphysical structure that differs from modern world as in case of Borges. This self-referent notion about their own history and geo-political consciousness as being at the edge in narrative and meta-poetics found new Latin American literary canon to mobilize the ground zero of Capital of *World Republic of Letters*. These local histories from the geo-political periphery change the global design of World Literature.

**Key Words:** World Literature/ Jorge Luis Borges/ Octavio Paz/ Pascale Casanova/ World Republic of Letters / Franco Moretti; 세계

문학/ 호르헤 루이스 보르헤스/ 옥타비오 파스/ 파스칼 카사노바/  
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## 1. Delving into parchment of foundation of Latin American literature

To understand the proclamation of Octavio Paz in 1950s that Latin American Literature is now cosmopolitan and contemporary in World Literature, we need to understand rootlessness and colonial background of Latin American Literature. Latin America is a continent dismembered by a conjunction of native oligarchies, military dictatorship and foreign imperialism. Paz says if these forces disappear, the boundaries will be different and the existence of Latin American Literature is one of proofs of historical unity of the Continent (Paz 1969, 4). Its literature is the response of the historical reality of Latin Americans to the utopian reality of America. But historical reality of Latin America was derived from the imaginary invention of Europe. So there lies Möbius Strip of the real and the imaginary in Latin America as happened in “Circled Ruins” of Jorge Luis Borges. European intellectuals already dreamed these utopias in the age of Renaissance. These dreams invented America. These notions of rootlessness inflicted Latin American writers and they had to create with their own dreams. These dreams are rootless and cosmopolitan. These dreams search for a foundation of literature and poetic incarnation of their own reality. Even though Borges’ Buenos Aires is as unreal as his Babylons or Ithacas, now Buenos Aires depicted by meta-poetic imagination is not a mere cosmopolitan dream but also a mirror of universal and, at the same time, Argentine labyrinth (Paz 1969, 4). The obsession to found new imaginary to Latin American reality and sense of rootlessness bestowed Latin American masters of narratives sense of freedom that

traverse imaginary pampa, llano and precolombian ruins without any anxiety of influence of precursor. But genuine precursors of Latin American modern writers are nothing more than Conquistadores like Christopher Columbus and Hernán Cortés that found not only Spanish colony but also literature that depicts utopian reality with empirical words. These Western words obliterate precolombian hieroglyph. Utopian projections of modern Latin American writers encompass reminiscence of Conquistadores' passion and lost cosmology of Indigenous people. Each foundation of Latin American literature is nothing more than a new script above diachronic parchment. Also there is a synchronic chain of thematic vogues and narrative techniques in Intercontinental literary space. In this essay I want to delve into the relationship of foundation of Latin American literature with the emergence of Latin American literature in World Literature. The crossroads of diachronic literary currents of Latin America with synchronic World Republic of Letters will coordinate the topology of its literature in *World Literature*.

## **2. Defining World Literature and coordinating Latin American Literature into it**

### 2.1. The concept of World Literature in Moretti and Casanova

Paz insists this utopian dream would lead Latin American literature to be more contemporary, cosmopolitan and, even, universal. The tautological chain of utopia, the cosmopolitan and the universal is based on the concept of modernity. Modernity, as global project of enlightenment of human being, always presumes lineal historicity and ultimate and utopian destination. Even if modernism criticizes this

concept of modernity such as *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, still these works have reminiscence and certain nostalgia of totalizing the world itself. In the meaning of the universal lies the applicability to anyone regardless of the region, gender and race.

All the particularity and difference are not major issues in the categorical and abstract theme of literature. The quest for the meaning of life and world can be fitted into any setting of historical and regional context like *La vida es sueño* of Calderón de la Barca and *Faust* of Goethe. Franco Moretti in his *Modern Epic* reinterprets Lucákian concept of the evolution of genre from epic to novel. Moretti's provocative theory transgresses the traditional conception of literary genres categorized by textual form and categorizes literary text by its thematic span. Thus he claims that texts like *Faust*, *Moby Dick*, *Ulysses* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* are epics because of their totalitarian and utopian thematic span that encompasses distinct past to bind it in epical manner and they are called "modern epics" because of some discontinuities with traditional epic. And these modern epics acquire universal meaning that can be transmitted to worldwide readers to reinterpret from their own contextual point of view. Moretti calls this modern epic as World Literature and it began by European literary tradition that reaches for universal mythology. And in case of Colombian writer's masterpiece, using Modern World-System framework of Immanuel Wallerstein, Moretti sees García Márquez's text as product of magic realism from periphery that reserves pre-modern magic but, at the same time, it follows the whole literary tradition of center. And this epic from the periphery gave meaning for imagination and re-enchantment that are denied by Western Literature from the viewpoint of the periphery. Moretti sees it as a proof of worldwide diffusion of World Literature. Even though he was cautious to mention the uneven relationship of literary diffusion between the center and the periphery, what he fails to see is the

unbearable weight of colonial being which is nostalgic about the Anti-State, the world before the formation of nation-State full of pre-Modern and Baroque imagery. This Baroque imagery and the evolution of Creole familiar lineage and town are already product of Western colonization. Angel Rama(1996, 31) in his *The Lettered City*, follows the theory of Alejo Carpentier about the constant of Baroque in Latin American culture asserting that at the very beginning of colonial writing the language of object that depicts the unknown reality to Europe always accompanied meta-language that mediate the object and Baroque trope of circumlocution suitable to European understanding. This juxtaposition of diglossia itself is innately Baroque due to the eclipse of two cultures.

Being secondary was the notion that inflicted the founder of Macondo, José Arcadio Buendía. So he tried to acquire the Western science and technology to free from his secondary and closed world to be more up to date to Western world. After his acquisition of knowledge of science, he questions himself to his Western god of science and religion. And he got mad in terms of colonized consciousness. But he goes beyond the time-space notion of Modernity. His madness in terms of Modernity is nothing more than a his consciousness about breakthrough with Modernity as colonial and secondary being. The glorious and magical funeral of the founder of Macondo implies the beginning of new Latin American consciousness that overcomes the Western cosmology and the myth of Modernity. In the rain of yellow petals, visits the disappeared indigenous prince, Cataure who ran away in the middle of the disease of oblivion which swept the whole precolombian civilization.

## 2.2. The strategy of being universal: the analogy in Octavio Paz and the irony in Jorge Luis Borges

The concept of “Contemporary” that we noted in Octavio Paz is well suited to “the Greenwich meridian (Casanova, 134)” of literary space of *The World Republic of Letters* by Pascale Casanova. It is the degree zero of aesthetic standard in Paris, the capital of literary autonomy and the center of literary diffusion from the guideline of aesthetic and renovated form not by commercial interests. Instead of using the concept of “World-System” that subsumes unequal relationship between literature of center and literature of periphery, Casanova prefers the term “structure” or “literary space” to confer more autonomy of parts of literary corpus in World Literature. Each text can operate individually in the undefined space with which frontiers compete. Casanova notes the history of, so-called, “world literature” beginning from the emergence of European Literature with vernacular languages with the shadow of Latin and formation of national literatures. And French writers tried to overcome this stage and declared autonomy of literature. Thus, in 19th century Paris became capital of World Republic of Letters and created structure of translations, editorials and critics that enable to impose “the universal” as criteria to admission to this Republic. Then she negates the universal as invented fiction of the center that obligate to “small literatures” or the literature from the periphery to compete for the recognition or resignation to the margin.

The declaration of Octavio Paz of the contemporary is exclamation of self-confidence of internationalization or ex-translation of Mexican Literature including his poetry and, at the same time, acknowledgement of his aesthetics that keeps up with the Greenwich meridian trend, in other words, in-translation of aesthetic center. We have to keep in notion with this irony with current view of Moretti and Casanova

from the angle from the center of World Literature after the globalization of world economy and information technology dealing with aesthetic strategy of writing of Octavio Paz and Jorge Luis Borges. To do that, it is necessary to examine their notion of World Literature from the angle from Latin America.

Octavio Paz and Jorge Luis Borges belong to universal literary tradition. Influential literary sources for Octavio Paz are all the heritage of modern poetry from Romanticism to Modernism as well as religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism. The precursor of his poetry comes not only from modern poets like Stéphane Mallarmé, Charles Baudelaire, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and André Breton, but also from hispanic poetic tradition like Rubén Darío and José Juan Tablada.

The erudition of Borges draws from all the Western canon of, so called, 'World Literature' from Homer to Kafka, all the western metaphysical tradition from Greek sophists to Schopenhauer, myths all around the world from Nordic mythology to the cabbala, not to mention with Buddhism and Taoism. He is truly a man of walking encyclopedia. Actually encyclopedia, which is literary double of the world, is his favorite material along with libraries, mirrors, a serial chain of dreams and labyrinths. That's why he is worldly acclaimed to be 'universal cosmopolitan writer'. Even in South Korea, after the publication of translation of his collected works in the early 90's, he is considered the most challenging cosmopolitan writer who influenced to Post-Structuralism and a precursor of Deconstruction Theory.

Octavio Paz and Jorge Luis Borges are considered as gurus of high culture along with Franz Kafka, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot and Marcel Proust. It can be fairly read without their national context for esthetic reason. That's why both writers were criticized severely by critics of cultural nationalism as uprooted cosmopolitan writers who neglect their political and cultural reality in 1940s and 50s. Even though Paz published *Labyrinth of Solitude* in 1953, an essay that delves into

psychoanalysis of Mexican identity, there remained harsh criticism from the nationalistic critics that his poetic world shows the dependency of Latin American lyric discourse to European esthetic codes and annihilate ideological and historical context. This criticism was at the peak when Paz published *The Bow and the Lyre* in 1956. In this book, Paz develops his own poetics influenced by Romanticism that poetry is the very essence of language that within poetic experience, an act of searching for transcendental present. By this notion of epiphany, each stage of histories can meet and converge into historical perspective and the subject can incorporate with the other:

The experience of the other culminates in the experience of the unity. Two contrary movements are implicated each other. In the motion of throwing himself backward, a lift forward is already latent. The act of precipitate into the other presents itself like the regression to something that we lost. Duality ceases and we are on the other shore (Paz 1956, 133).

Here I translate Spanish word “orilla” into “shore” what Beatriz Sarlo translate it as “edge”. It is in the realm of esthetic Modernity where different layers of time-space and subjectivities are converged by analogy transgressing of the bourgeois’ rationality, which is fundamental base in Modernity. This is essence of his meta-poetics. He was self-referent with his poetics based on his literary formation of modern poetry. The prefix “meta” in Paz is heading towards analogy rather than irony, which configures the narrative of Borges. The zeal of communion of Paz, which is main theme of his masterpiece “Sunstone (1957)” stems from romanticism and surrealism that mystic function of poetry that shows the lost utopia or origin of human society and language as a prophet. Nationalistic critics criticized this romantic notion of timeless utopia as the example of colonization of western esthetics. But isn’t it cultural mestizaje right definition of



Mexican cultural identity according to Vasconcelos in *Cosmic Race*? The power of cultural syncretism of Octavio Paz is not originated from rootless occidentalization at the expense of cultural identity but from his poetic nostalgia and passion to melt with other. Even dealing with national emblem 'Sunstone', the Aztec calendar, Paz never denotes any Aztec God's name in spite of his deep understanding of Mesoamerican cosmology. But 584 verses are derived from 584 days of cycle of Venus and repetition from first six verses at the end suggests the regression to the origin of history. When poetic subject contemplates the central face of Sunstone, the face of fifth sun in Aztec myth is transfigured into the face of poetic subject, then girls that he loved and historic figures from Socrates, Lincoln, Robespierre and Francisco Madero at the moment of their death. Sunstone, like Theater of Memories of Giulio Camilo in *Terra nostra* by Carlos Fuentes, is a tool for revelation at the personal and historical realm. And Mesoamerican cosmology serves as a critical filter to Modernity.

When we move over to River Plate, the notion of cultural syncretism or *mestizaje* is deluded. Because Buenos Aires is the most cosmopolitan city in Latin America comprised of criollos and European immigrants without any Precolombian heritage. This is at the end of the Western World. This notion of being at the edge, or on the borderline between Europe and Latin America, not by geological meaning but by mental consciousness caused to feel ironic to the intellectuals of Buenos Aires. I agree with Beatriz Sarlo when she insists on Borges' nationalistic feature not in conventional way of narrow critics of cultural nationalism that emphasizes oral tradition and description of rural reality in a manner of *Costumbrista*:

In short, there is no writer in Argentine literature who is more Argentine than Borges. In his work, this national cultural tone is not expressed in the representation of things but rather his

exploration of how great literature can be written in a culturally marginal nation. Borges' work always deals with this question, one of the most important questions for a relatively young nation, without strong cultural traditions, located in the extreme south of the former Spanish dominions in Latin America, the extreme south of the most culturally impoverished Viceroyalty of Spain which furthermore did not have great Precolombian indigenous cultures, as could be found in other Latin American countries (Sarlo 2007).

Then she develops the idea of margin, border and edge to characterize Borges and his literature. There is a tension in it caused by mixing with, and feeling nostalgia for, a European culture, which can never wholly offer an alternative cultural base. This kind of tension is a game on the edge of various cultures, which touch on the borders, in a space that Borges would call *las orillas*. In this way, a writer emerges who has two sides, who is, at once, both cosmopolitan and national. Borges reinvents a cultural past and reconstitutes an Argentine literary tradition at the same time as he uses all the sources of foreign literatures asserting the liberty of those who are marginal to make free use of all cultures from the edge of the West. This kind of reordering national literary tradition enables Borges to cut, paste and rewrite foreign canons without any feeling of subordination or prejudice. He is cosmopolitan on the edge and marginal in the center. This notion of being on the border gave his literary work so peculiar and genuine. His originality came from citations, quotations, rewriting of other texts. The lack of cultural background in New World gave him an authority to search for something new, to found a new origin.

There are no legends in this land and not a single ghost walks through our streets. That is our disgrace. Our lived reality is grandiose yet the life of our imagination is paltry [---] Buenos

Aires is now more than a city, it is a country and we must find the poetry, the music, the painting, the religion and the metaphysics appropriate to its greatness. That is the size of my hope and I invite you all to become gods to work for its fulfillment (Borges 1926, 8-9).

Paltriness of Argentine literary tradition, as he confessed, gave him permission to seek for the essence of the West from the margin. Being at the margin in cultural consciousness pivots him to transgress the edge of Western Canon.

What is our Argentine tradition? I believe we can answer this question easily and that there is no problem here. I believe our tradition is all of Western culture, and I also believe we have a right to this tradition, greater than that which the inhabitants of one or another Western nation might have. I recall here an essay of Thorstein Veblen, the North American sociologist, on the pre-eminence of Jews in Western culture. He asks if this pre-eminence allows us to conjecture about the innate superiority of the Jews, and answers in the negative; he says that they are outstanding in Western culture because they act within that culture and, at the same time, do not feel tied to it by any special devotion (Borges 1970, 218).

This proposition, formed in the geographical and cultural margin of the River Plate, offers a new situation for the writer and for Argentine literature, whose operations of mixture, of free choice without devotions, do not have to respect the hierarchical order attributed to originals. If no originality is attached to the text, but only to the writing or reading of a text, the inferiority of the margins vanishes and the peripheral writer is entitled to the same claims as his or her European predecessors or contemporaries.

In “The End” which is published in 1944, Borges depicts the death,

in a duel, of Martín Fierro, a tragic gaucho of national fable, which had been consolidated during nation-state formation period. In the original version of Miguel Hernández, Martín Fierro, at the end, parts from his children after hearing their life stories. Borges imagines the story just after this scene, he imagines what Hernández had never written. Martín Fierro is waiting for his ethic death from the Gauchesque tradition. He waits the duel with brother of Moreno that Fierro killed earlier. That was unjust murder. He thinks this is the cosmic compensation for his crime. By putting an end of Argentine literary hero, Borges interprets the ethical code among Gauchos in his own way. By killing the man of national pride and compassion, by annihilating all the prejudice and interpretation of Gauchesque genre—just nostalgic interpretation of rural culture, Borges, as usual, transfigures Martín Fierro as the existential man of cosmic destiny.

### 3. Global design of World Literature and Latin American Literature as local histories

There are few Western writers that encompass from the genetic origin of Civilizations to apocalyptic sense of an end. Borges and Paz along with García Márquez are questioning the origin of their being at the edge of the West. The literature of the West is one in which major questions must be assumed to have been solved. The characteristic feature of Latin American masters that differentiate with European writers is their obsession of total history in a global manner that encompasses the Old World and the New World. They share the anxiety of beginning along with anxiety of influence. The search of their origin and identity goes back to 1492, the beginning of New World and the end of Precolombian old world. Then again, eschatological notion of history and subjectivity always is infiltrated in

their self-conscious poetics.

In the episode of disease of oblivion in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in the beginning period of foundation of creole town, Macondo, this disease caused Buendía family to define their identity not to forget his cultural origin. But this disease caused to indigenous people to obliterate their whole civilization as in case of Cataure and Visitación, the only indigenous people who lived with Buendía family. So Genesis of Creole town automatically implies the Apocalypse of Indigenous heritage. The sense of up-rootness always goes with new foundation for something whether it is positive or negative in any Latin American fables. And they yearn for the revelation of total history whether it is Macondo as in case of García Márquez, poetic revelation searching for the eternal present as in case of Octavio Paz, or fantastic region like Uqbar with different metaphysical structure that differs from modern world as in case of Borges. This self-referent notion about their own history and geo-political consciousness as being at the edge in narrative and meta-poetics found new Latin American literary canon to mobilize the ground zero of Capital of World Republic of Letters. These local histories from the geo-political periphery change the global design of World Literature.

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