

4. One Country, Several Literatures: Towards a Comparative Understanding of Contemporary Literature in Spain

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Since 2008, a severe and prolonged economic crisis has tormented Spain, forcing millions to leave their homes or even the country, fostering grassroots movements that have radically changed the political landscape, deepening the conflict between Catalonia and the central government and making large portions of the population question the Constitution and the Spanish democracy as a whole. This precarious and convulsive situation certainly raises questions to scholars interested in contemporary literature's role as a creative commentary to societal affairs. For example, how has literature in Spain generally represented and responded to this economic, social, historical and constitutional crisis? Which kind of social critique does it formulate? Well, nobody really has a complete picture, since very few people read the four official languages in which this literature is articulated, and no scholarly efforts have been made to make comparative, collaborative readings. This chapter is an attempt to map a comparative approach to the literatures in Spain.

The adjective *Spanish* (and its equivalent in Spanish) normally refers to something “Of or pertaining to Spain or its people”, as the OED has it, but when it comes to language and literature, things become rather more complicated. Today, Spanish/Castilian

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is the official language of Spain, while three languages are co-official and protected in the Constitution: Catalan, Galician and Basque, spoken altogether by some 26 per cent of the population. However, even though several languages have always coexisted within the borders of the country since its formation in the fifteenth century, Castilian – the vernacular spoken until then only in medieval Castile – soon became synonymous with Spanish, as the supposed *lingua franca* of the entire kingdom. Today, speakers in the monolingual parts of Spain tend to refer to the language as *español*, while most speakers in the bilingual parts of the country, and also in the majority of Spanish America, generally prefer *castellano*, as a way of avoiding connotations to Spain as a country. The use of one term or the other, as well as the view of Spanish as the common language, is complex and politically charged.

Equally complex is the question of Spanish literature. When scholars and laymen talk about Spanish literature, or *literatura española*, what they generally mean is literature in Spanish from Spain. Nonetheless, there are other vital and well-established literatures in Spain. Catalan and Galician have medieval literary roots that even antedate Castilian letters. Spain has been a unified country at least since the nineteenth century,¹ so even though its fiction is written in the four (or more) languages of the state, at the same time it concerns, represents and is produced in a shared national reality. How did Castilian literature come to represent Spanish literature as a whole? What scholarly attempts have been made to break this monolingual paradigm? Could literary studies encompass literature written in the four co-official languages of Spain? How do the vernacular languages of the country relate to the cosmopolitan Spanish?

¹ The popular belief – voiced even by the then Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy (see Patricia R. Blanco, “España no es la nación más antigua de Europa por mucho que Rajoy insista”, *El país*, 15 March 2017) – is that the nation-state of Spain is born at the end of the fifteenth century. Most historians, however, rather situate the foundation of Spain in 1810; up until then, the different regions had separate laws, fiscal systems and currency. Henry Kamen, *Imagining Spain: Historical Myth and National Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 1–37.

Literary-Historical Overview

Spanish history has been a constant struggle between the universal and the vernacular. After the marriage in 1469 of the Catholic Monarchs, Queen Isabella I of Castile and King Ferdinand II of Aragon, the country was further consolidated in the remarkable year of 1492, when Columbus first reached America, and Muslims and Jews were expelled from the Peninsula after having been present for 700 years. The first grammar in a vernacular language in Europe, Antonio de Nebrija's *Gramática sobre la lengua castellana*, was also published in 1492, at the same time marking the socio-political dominance of Castilian in a kingdom where several regionally rooted languages co-existed. Castilian thus became an imperial language, both in the Peninsula and in the overseas territories. By the time Sebastián de Covarrubias published the first dictionary of a vernacular language in Europe, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española* (1611), the interchangeability between the two denominations was signaled in the very title. Despite Spain's status as a unified nation in charge of a world-wide empire, with Spanish as its vehicle, Catalonia and the Basque Country nevertheless retained their vernacular languages and jurisdictions. Catalonia, the strongest and most populous of the non-Spanish-speaking regions, was definitely subdued as a consequence of the War of Spanish Succession in 1714, when Castilian replaced Catalan in all judicial aspects. Soon after, Spanish was established as the official language of the country, enforcing the monolingual paradigm, to draw on Yasemin Yildiz's phrase, at a time when languages were perceived as structuring principles for both national feeling and subjectivity, and multilingualism was seen as a threat to political and psychological cohesion.²

Spanish literature undoubtedly had one of its most glorious periods in the *Siglo de oro* (usually placed between 1492 and 1681), but not until the eighteenth century did there exist a historical consciousness of a Spanish literary past, and therefore also

² Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (Fordham University Press, 2012), 6–14.

a concept of Spanish national literature as such.³ According to Mainer, this occurred at a time when the concept of literature began to encompass a more general knowledge in written form, but also when Spanish intellectuals tended to compare a mediocre present with the glories of the past. In 1813, only a year after the end of the Napoleonic invasion and the first Spanish Constitution, a group of intellectuals proposed that literature should be an integral part of pre-university education – replacing the old rhetoric and poetics – while also establishing a link to the teaching of history. Reflecting the semantic shift from patriotism to nationalism, the education of both literature and history would be parts of the socialisation and national identification of the future citizen, and national literature would be understood as “the natural expression of a language, topics, attitudes and heroes that are the collective heritage”.⁴

This institutionalisation of nationalism, based on the triad of national (i.e. Spanish/Castilian) language, literature and history, occurs in the 1860s, at the same time – or even because of⁵ – the renaissance of vernacular cultures in the country. Industrialisation and modernisation brought renewal to vernacular cultures; both the Catalan *Renaixença* and the Galician *Rexurdimento* denote major cultural and linguistic upswings.⁶ If Catalonia fostered a

³ José-Carlos Mainer, “La invención de la literatura española,” in *Literaturas regionales en España: Historia y crítica*, ed. José María Enguita and José-Carlos Mainer (Zaragoza: Inst. Fernando el Católico, 1994).

⁴ “la literatura nacional, ahora entendida como expresión natural de una lengua, unos temas, unas actitudes y unos héroes que son patrimonio colectivo.” *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵ Romero Tobar mentions a royal order of 1867 in which “the great number of dramatic works presented to the censorship in the different dialects threatened the generalisation of the national language” (“el gran número de obras dramáticas presentadas a la censura en los diferentes dialectos atentaba a la generalización de la lengua nacional”). Leonardo Romero Tobar, “Entre 1898 y 1998: La historiografía de la literatura española”, *Rilce* 15, no. 1 (1999): 29. Note that the other languages are called “dialects” of “the national language”.

⁶ “Extraterritoriality and Multilingualism”, in *Spain Beyond Spain*, ed. Brad Epps and Luis Fernández Cifuentes (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005), 191.

cosmopolitan outlook and sought to be a part of the larger world, then the Basque Country, largely lacking the intellectual middle class that had been a driving force in Barcelona's cultural rebirth, responded to modernisation by turning inward and to traditional religiosity.⁷ The Spanish-American war in 1898, when Spain lost its last overseas colonies (Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines) and suffered a devastating military defeat against the US, was a major blow to the Spanish self-understanding.⁸ The ensuing soul-search was channelled through the works of a brilliant group of writers, the *Generación del 98*, but it also fuelled "a monolithic conception of national identity constructed on a supposedly archetypal Castilian character".⁹ The loss of the colonies hardened the attitude of Spanish nationalists towards non-State nationalists, and a royal decree declared Spanish as the only official language of the country in 1902.¹⁰

The latter part of the century also saw the birth of a philology in service of the nation state. Two towering figures of Spanish philology have greatly influenced how Spanish literature has been read as an expression of national character: Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo (1856–1912) and his disciple Ramón Menéndez Pidal (1869–1968). Menéndez Pelayo's philological project was to chart the Castilian dominance in the Iberian Peninsula, and his influence was to be long-lasting: "we can thus speak of the philological project of Menéndez Pelayo, with its deeply inscribed religiosity, frank justification of centralism, and socially conservative habitus, as having a time horizon of nearly a century

⁷ Enric Ucelay da Cal, "The Nationalisms of the Periphery: Culture and Politics in the Construction of National Identity", in *Spanish Cultural Studies: an Introduction. The Struggle for Modernity*, ed. Helen Graham and Jo Labanyi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 37.

⁸ Sebastian Balfour, "The Loss of Empire, Regenerationism, and the Forging of a Myth of National Identity", in *Spanish Cultural Studies: An Introduction. The Struggle for Modernity*, ed. Helen Graham and Jo Labanyi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁹ Balfour, "The Loss of Empire", 30.

¹⁰ Joan Ramón Resina, *Del hispanismo a los estudios ibéricos: Una propuesta federativa para el ámbito cultural* (Madrid Biblioteca Nueva, 2009), 169.

in length (1880–1980).¹¹ But if the guiding principle in his search for Castile’s soul was Catholicism, then for Menéndez Pidal it was language.¹² By the end of the nineteenth century, there no longer existed a need to justify the search for national character in terms of religion; literature and language were rather seen as the secular legitimations of the nation. In this sense, philology in the service of the State seems to reverse cause and effect: it perceived the present as eternal and mysterious in order to justify the search for national character by what Resina calls “‘our’ way of being”.¹³ What Menéndez Pidal saw as “Castile’s original character” is at the same time a tool for charting a tradition and “the normative ethos of the national community”.¹⁴ As already stated, this view has been in force even until our days, which is also shown in Santana’s review of Spanish literary history manuals.¹⁵ Francisco Rico’s monumental and widely acclaimed *Historia y crítica de la literatura española* (1980–present) clings unequivocally to the monolingual understanding of the Spanish nation, equating Spanish literature with artistic expression in Castilian, without further justification.

A Comparative Understanding

Although the field of Iberian Studies has provided a rich and refreshing perspective on Spanish letters and the place of literature in the Peninsula, above all in the study of large-scale, historical developments, the inclusion of Portuguese literature does not seem altogether justified in social and political readings of

¹¹ Thomas Harrington, “Belief, Institutional Practices, and Intra-Iberian Relations”, in *Spain Beyond Spain*, ed. Brad Epps and Luis Fernández Cifuentes (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005), 213.

¹² Resina, 73.

¹³ “Post-Hispanism, or the Long Goodbye of National Philology”, in *Writers In Between Languages: Minority Literatures in the Global Scene*, ed. Mari José Olaziregi (Reno: Center for Basque Studies, 2009), 205.

¹⁴ “Post-Hispanism”.

¹⁵ Mario Santana, “Mapping National Literatures: Some Observations on Contemporary Hispanism”, in *Spain Beyond Spain*, ed. Brad Epps and Luis Fernández Cifuentes (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005).

literature, especially if we want to study contemporary literature.¹⁶ In fact, recent attempts to reconfigure the study of literary production in Spain often start from the paradigm of the country in terms that rather suggest a comparative approach to Spanish literature. Taking into account comparative literature's openness to the interconnectedness of literary systems, Antonio Monegal finds it "surprising that in a country which displays in such an obvious way its multicultural makeup, comparative literature has not found a more welcoming environment".¹⁷ The reasons behind this state of affairs are cultural, institutional and political, perhaps even to the extent that it is "only from a prudent distance, however, that a Hispanist can propose the inclusion of works written in Galician, Basque, or Catalan in Spain's literary histories" – such an approach would be unpopular not only among non-State nationalists, but among their State counterparts too.¹⁸ Delgado insists that Hispanists need to abandon the idea of a universal, harmonious normalcy, where Spain is one, single unproblematic entity and Spanish is its universal expression, and instead focus on "the ideological processes that differentiate between the particular and the general, the local and the universal".¹⁹ Mario Santana adds that we should "strongly object to the validity claims of presenting the study of literary production in

¹⁶ For introductions to Iberian Studies, see for example *Reading Iberia* (2007; ed. Helena Buffery et al.); Joan Ramón Resina's *Del hispanismo a los estudios ibéricos: Una propuesta federativa para el ámbito cultural* (2009); the monumental *A Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula*, volume I (2010; ed. Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza et al.) and II (2016; ed. Domínguez et al.); and *New Spain, New Literatures* (2010; ed. Luis Martín-Estudillo).

¹⁷ Antonio Monegal, "A Landscape of Relations: Peninsular Multiculturalism and the Avatars of Comparative Literature", in *Spain Beyond Spain*, ed. Brad Epps and Luis Fernández Cifuentes (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005), 245.

¹⁸ Geraldine Cleary Nichols, "Blank Spaces: Literary History, Spain, and the Third Millennium", *ibid.*, 258.

¹⁹ Luisa Elena Delgado, "If We Build It, Will They Come? Iberian Studies as a Field of Dreams", in *Iberian Modalities: A Relational Approach to the Study of Culture in the Iberian Peninsula*, ed. Joan Ramón Resina (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 49.

only one language as a way of gaining knowledge of the totality of a culture” – here, the totality of a culture refers to “a reflection on Spain as a whole” – and that literatures of other languages are not studied lest the foundation on a monolingual conception of the nation be questioned.²⁰ Even an otherwise conservative critic as Menéndez Pelayo considered, in 1878, that taking Castilian literature for Spanish was a “fatal mistake” that has contributed to muddle and obscure literary studies to the utmost.²¹

There have certainly been attempts to include non-Spanish letters in overviews of the literature in Spain,²² and more are underway,²³ as well as university courses that include elements of non-Spanish letters,²⁴ but no comparative project seems to have

²⁰ Santana, 117–18.

²¹ “En sentir de ilustres críticos a quienes respeto, con el sentimiento de no poder seguirlos, la *Historia de la literatura española* no es más ni menos que la *historia de la literatura castellana*. Este error, a mi ver, funesto, y que no sólo a la literatura, sino a otras esferas trasciende, ha contribuído a embrollar y oscurecer hasta lo sumo, muy doctos juicios e investigaciones.” Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo, *Estudios y discursos de crítica histórica y literaria*, vol. 6, Edición nacional de las obras completas de Menéndez Pelayo (Santander: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1941), 3.

²² Already in 1998, in an issue of *Foro hispánico* characterised by an optimism not very common today, van Hooft Comajuncosas proposes a comparative Spanish literary history and conducts a survey among scholars in the field to come up with definitions and delimitations. His first calls the proposal “Peninsular literature”, which he later changes, upon many scholars’ disagreement, to “literature in Spain”. Andreu van Hooft Comajuncosas, “Una historia de historias: encuesta sobre historiografía literaria”, in *Foro hispánico. Literaturas de España 1975–1998: Convergencias y divergencias*, ed. Andreu Van Hooft Comajuncosas (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998).

²³ One example would be Delgado’s forthcoming *A Cultural History of Spanish Literature*. See Luisa Elena Delgado, *La nación singular: Fantasías de la normalidad democrática española (1996–2011)* (Madrid: Siglo XX, 2014), 193, n. 79.

²⁴ The Spanish online university, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED), offers a Master in “Hispanic literatures (Catalan, Galician and Basque) in the European Context”. Denominations are difficult here, but more than a few representatives of non-Spanish letters would probably object to being a part of the “Hispanic”.

been undertaken. As we have seen in this short overview, Spanish literature is a construction that needs to be problematised from the perspective of comparative literature, not only because regionalist movements are as strong as ever, but also because we cannot, as Santana says, pretend to say something about literature in Spain in general unless we find a way to include all languages. In order to avoid unnecessary inclusions and historically charged hierarchies, a comparative project would need to avoid naming its object of study “Spanish”, “Peninsular”, “Hispanic” or “Iberian” literature, and instead study literature *in Spain*, applying a more spatial, and more neutral, characterisation based on the paradigm of the Spanish state. There is no need to essentialise literature in Spain as the only frame of study – other limitations would certainly be justifiable in different historical periods – but rather to adapt the framework to the object of interest. In a study of contemporary literature, for example of fiction related to the ongoing economic and social crisis, the country as a construct has had and still has a strong influence on literary production and reception, regardless of the language of writing.²⁵ Likewise, the literatures would also need to be studied on a horizontal plane, without the Castilian-centric point of view that makes non-Spanish letters mere appendixes to the national literature. Here, the tools of comparative literature are required, since a study like this cannot be a simple juxtaposition of “national” literatures – such surveys already exist and do not contribute much to a larger understanding of the common ground between the literatures. Only then may we answer questions about how the literature of Spain has responded to nationwide issues, such as the ongoing social and economic crisis, and evaluate the kind of critique formulated in contemporary fiction. A global understanding of contemporary letters in Spain demands a postmonolingual approach that may break with previous literary, cultural, institutional and political conventions.

²⁵ No limitation will be wholly satisfying here; arguably, literature in Spain could also include translations and writing in other, diasporic languages by authors in Spain. Translations would speak very little of the current situation, but diasporic literature would possibly constitute an important, albeit very minor, knowledge production to take into account.

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