Preface

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Despite the enormous production of interpretive criticism on Latin American literature since midcentury, the lack of adequate historical and bibliographic control is really quite surprising. This is true not only of what is available in English, but also, and more significantly, what is available in the specific languages of Latin American literary production. Although some excellent preliminary attempts at bibliographic control exist and one can point to a number of standard secondary-school manuals of literary history, comprehensive treatises of either Latin American literature in general or the various national literatures are notably lacking, and even more so when the emphasis shifts from the historical registries of names and titles to analyses based on theoretically explicit principles.

Following the pattern of *A Handbook of Latin American Literature* (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1987; 2d ed., 1992), the present volume represents the attempt to provide Mexican literature with something like an adequate coverage of significant literary production from the specific point of view of detailed analyses of major texts. Rather than merely survey canonical authors and works, this literary history pretends to offer instead fairly detailed commentaries on those works that may be considered to define the parameters of Mexican literature. As such, these works are both the entries in a time-honored canon and texts that may, under a scrutiny dictated by alternative critical practices, emerge as contenders for privileged positions in a recasting of the canon. Such works emerge with a shift in focus based on historical principles (the recovery of pre-Columbian literature as an integral part of what is only, strictly speaking, a Mexican literature after independence in the nineteenth century), on social principles (the recovery of a silenced tradition of feminine or homosexual writing; the conjugation with Mexican literature of a Mexican-American production in both English and Spanish), or on generic principles (the inclusion in a global definition of cultural text of forms of expression not ordinarily considered properly literary—the journalistic essay, the historical chronicle, or literary criticism itself).

Inevitably, such a representation of a major national literature can only be undertaken as a collective project. The reasons for this are many, the most obvious one being the scope of material to be covered. Despite the devastating

effects of current national and economic circumstances on cultural production in Mexico, publishing output continues to be extensive, and in any one genre there is virtually more than even the most industrious scholar can reasonably be expected to keep track of. This is especially true in the area of contemporary fiction, where the production seems to grow geometrically from one generation to the other. But this expansion is also a dimension of other genres. For example, although actual theatrical production may constitute an easily assimilable block of material (assuming that one is able always to actually see the plays performed), the sociocultural backgrounds of theatrical activity in modern Latin American societies extend significantly the range of other materials the scholar must be conversant with. Concomitantly, while poetry may strike one as almost a microgenre (especially alongside the sort of vast novelistic project someone like Carlos Fuentes engages in), the artistic seed bed, so to speak, of poetry is complex and requires constant and intense scrutiny. Finally, the ways in which multigeneric writing figures prominently in contemporary Mexico means that one cannot be content merely to limit scholarly focus to traditional genres like poetry or the novel: individuals like Elena Poniatowska, María Luisa Mendoza, and José Joaquín Blanco are not simply writing in several genres. Rather, their writing demands examination as a single, coherent textual project in which generic variations are secondary to the overall cultural principles that guide the production of their variegated works. In the context of such an intense modern literary productivity such as one finds in Mexico, only a collaborative effort can hope to represent adequately what needs to be considered a representative inventory of literary activity.

Such a circumstance extends also to critical focus and analytical methodology. Although the contributors were originally set the goal of providing an ideologically framed interpretation of the material assigned to them, it quickly became apparent that no unified orientation, ideological or otherwise, could legitimately be hoped for. In the first place, ideological approaches to Latin American literature mean many different things, even if, from the perspective of the United States, there may appear to be something like intellectual unanimity among researchers in Latin America as to what an ideological agenda for the study of Latin American literature and its national manifestations should be. The fact that different critical voices are involved is reflected in different perspectives on the same phenomenon. Therefore, the reader will find varying dates given for literary movements like modernism or conflicting accounts regarding its development. It is no longer possible to aspire to unitary interpretations of cultural phenomena, and the divergences to be found among the scholars whose work is represented here must be taken as an index of the interesting points of debate about Mexican literary history. If there was anything approximating such an agenda in the late 1960s or 1970s, multiple circumstances have contributed to fragmenting it substantially.

The result is that, while few scholars of Latin American literature, in either Latin America or the United States, would subscribe to anything other than the belief that literary production is intimately related to sociohistorical pa-

rameters, the actual models and methodologies employed vary significantly. Thus, representing the sustained commitment to examine literature as part of larger sociohistorical manifestations, the essays assembled here nevertheless constitute diverse emphases in how that examination is to be executed. Inevitably, historical and generic considerations of a rather traditional nature serve as basic organizing principles of the volume and of individual essays, principally because, despite the influence of innovative critical classifications, our courses and our general perceptions continue to subscribe to these principles. Yet, within this framework, one should be able to consult textual readings that are underlain by the attempt to explore production in Mexico as part of a comprehensive cultural dynamic in that country.

Finally, the specific research commitments of each scholar determine significantly the way in which each section is organized. In contrast to an encyclopedic approach where each entry demonstrates approximately the same organization of material, contributors were given considerable latitude in the structuring of their contributions. The only guiding injunction was to ensure that interpretive comments adhered to the principle of placing literary production in its sociohistorical context. This meant that a conventional historical registry was to be forfeited, that only a tightly defined inventory of significant texts was to be dealt with, and that principled critical analysis was being called for. The result is a volume that should be of use to both the specialist seeking a fresh interpretation of major texts and the general user (including students) requiring an informed discussion of the primary texts they are likely to find cited as exemplary of Mexico's literary production. Each essay closes with an annotated, selective listing of major critical sources that, when taken together, constitute a basic bibliography of extant criticism.

I cannot help but take advantage of this preface to make some comments about what I have learned about Mexican literary scholarship in the United States in the preparation of this volume. There is much valuable literary scholarship on Mexico that emerged in roughly two generations of industrious Latin American research in this country, and the reader will find the best of such work represented in the annotated bibliographies that accompany each essay. Yet, at the same time, there is a considerable asymmetry to this scholarship when placed alongside either the criticism being written in Mexico or alongside the scope of Mexican literary production. It is impossible not to be struck by the relatively small numbers of individuals who have anything approximating a comprehensive research program devoted to Mexican literature, in the sense of scholars producing a steady output of path-breaking interpretations. Concomitantly, one is frequently overwhelmed by the enormous concentration of effort on a few giants of contemporary Mexican letters and an attendant inattention to many other valuable figures who in various ways are making highly singular and original contributions to the growing stature of Mexican literary culture. It would be arrogant of me to cite names of those contemporary authors I feel are overstudied, but a simple check of the *MLA International Bibliography*, the *Hispanic American Periodicals Index*, or the

Year's Work in Modern Language Studies will show what I mean about what may be considered to be an imbalance in the coverage of Mexican literature on the part of the American academy. Another aspect of this circumstance are the gaps in our consideration of earlier periods of Mexican literature. The 1992 phenomenon has brought with it an enormous increase in the study of conquest and colonial topics through the seventeenth century. But the eighteenth century remains understudied, and there are many topics in the literature of the decades preceding the 1910 Revolution that seem to be perennially ignored. One has no pretense of contributing to bringing about a reorientation of the history and criticism of Mexican literature in the United States with this compilation, but it should have some value in assisting users in determining where they might do well to invest their intellectual efforts toward a more comprehensive understanding of literature in Mexico over five hundred years.

A final note: more specific bibliographic information on the topics and authors covered in this volume may be found in the new edition of my *Mexican Literature: A Bibliography of Secondary Sources* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1992).

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