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SPANISH ROOTS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE*

When one of his best friends told *Enrique Hank Lópsz*, the distinguished Chicano novelist and politician that despite his long, comical name and his birth he was not really a Mexican but an American through and through, he answered: "That is a minority view and totally devoid of realism. One could just as well say that Martin Luther King was not a Negro, that he was merely an American. But the plain truth is that neither I nor Martin Luther Kings of our land can escape the fact that we are Mexican and Negro with roots planted so deeply in the United States that we have grown those strong, little hyphene that make us Mexican-American and Negro-American."¹

The Spanish roots in the United States can be traced back to the scattered, miscellaneous but ever growing economic, historical and cultural contacts of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century colonies with Spain and Spanish America.

In the seventeenth century the hatred of Spain was burning in the minds of English colonists. The pioneers feared the nation whose colonies in America were many times the area of their mother country.² They hated her Catholic tyrannies and were frightened of the legends concerning the terrible Spaniard, his cruelty and barbarism in the colonies, his fanaticism in his dark religion of the Inquisition, and his prosperous presence in the rich South. Race, religion, economic rivalry sharpened animosity. *Cotton Mather* described the differences between the English and Spanish colonies: "Gentlemen!" he cried. "It is the War of the Lord which you are now Engaged in: and it is the Help of the Lord, that we are at Home affectionately imploring for you. We have made a fair and just purchase of our Country from the Natives here: not encroaching on them after the Spanish Fashion, in any of their Properties and Possessions."³

Although allusion has been made to an increasing understanding of the Spanish civilization, this attitude persisted long after the colonial period. *Julián Juderías*, in his book, *La leyenda negra*, in tracing the persistence of this distrust and these old prejudices, attacks Ticknor, *Prescott*, *Motley*, and *George Bancroft* for perpetuating

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it.⁴ For many Americans Spain and Mexico still mean troublesome neighbors, wars and political instability.

There are two main channels by which Spanish culture has become part of the seventeenth-century colonists.

The primary transmitter of Spanish culture was England. *Samuel Sewall* for example sent for his Spanish books to London and both *Cotton Mather*, his father *Increase Mather* and his grandfather *Richard Mather* and some poets: *Anne Bradstreet*, *Edward Taylor*, *Benjamin Colman*, *Mather Byles*, *Joseph Green* etc. were deeply rooted in the land they originated from, and her literature they were influenced by.⁵ Not only in the American colonies but in England, too, at the turn of the seventeenth century the Spanish cultural influences are not easy to define, their precise patterns still controversial. But it is certain that during the Elizabethan era the impact of Spanish novel was substantial. In seventeenth-century England the early romance *Amadis de Gaula* was read, and we may link *Montemayor's Diana* with the development of the English pastoral, *Antonio de Guevara* with euphuism, and *Cervantes*, with the popularity of the picaresque story. Both in old England and the young Republic Spanish historians, novelists and poets, especially religious poets were known in certain intellectual quarters. Culturally direct intercourse with Spain hardly existed.

Another great beacon of Spanish culture to the seventeenth-century colonists was the already flourishing art and cultural wealth of Spanish America, especially Mexico. In the last decades of the sixteenth century some thirty thousand titles were imported into New Spain. Printing had begun there in 1535 or 1536. In Mexico City alone the professional booksellers numbered some fifty: and people in this town could listen to secular music, look at paintings by contemporary masters, attend poetic festivals, could see noble monuments of Spanish architecture or study medicine and mathematics.⁶ These were inexhaustible sources of Spanish influence on American culture.

The third possible channel, the indirect influence of the Spanish settlements in the borderland of the country and the Southwest could not find its way to the northern seaboard colonies. The foundations of a Spanish or Mexican culture were just being laid in the regions later known as Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. As early as 1598 in New Mexico were acted the religious plays which were to live on through the centuries. Here *Los moros y los cristianos*, *Los pastores*, *Los tres magos*,⁷ and other dramas were shown which form so picturesque a part of Spanish folk literature. New England knew little of such matters. At that time these regions seemed incredibly remote.

Cotton Mather and *Samuel Sewall* paved the way, unwittingly, for Spanish influence on the literature of the United States. Their communication with Mexico made the dissemination of the Spanish language and knowledge including literature, painting and architecture easier. Both *Mather* and *Sewall* studied Spanish. The motives of these early scholars for learning this language were political and economic but primarily religious, to protestantize Mexico and South America. *Sewall* suggested that the introduction of the Protestant Bible in Spanish should be the first step in the mass conversion. *Cotton Mather*, a characteristic man of Puritan New England and the foremost Spanish scholar in New England in his age, besides religious matters, was keenly sensitive to Spanish arts, literature and language. He read *Cervantes* whose name occurred in the catalogues of several libraries, and in his *Magnalia Christi Americana* he speaks of the "romances of Don Quixote and the Seven Champions." His good command of Spanish made *Mather* the author of the first book written in Spanish in the northern colonies. His Spanish book, *La Religion Pura, en Doze palabras Fieles, dignas de ser recibidas de Todos*, published in Boston in 1699, written in a simple, vigorous language, is a great and lasting influence upon American literary culture.

In the eighteenth century the widening awareness of Spanish culture is obvious. The seventeenth-century Spanish plants took root in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California, blossoming in language, customs, folkways and arts. Spanish towns with names now so familiar that we have almost forgotten their origins (San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco and over two thousand other settlements), and the missions with their old Spanish architectural form developed their systems of education. Spanish words spread and crept into the English language. Spanish historical and religious plays, already mentioned, interwoven with ballads and children's songs, were performed.

By the middle of the eighteenth century it became evident that there were two important political powers and two major languages in the New World. The political presence of Spain, America's participation in Spain's wars, in her border conflicts and inevitably in her culture, too, focused the attention of the eighteenth-century leaders like *Franklin*, *Jefferson* and *John Adams* to the importance of Spain and the substantial knowledge of the Spanish language and history. In 1777 the enthusiastic reception of the *History of America*, one of the great works of historiography, by the Scotch historian *William Robertson* proved the interest of American readers in Spain. Between 1750 and 1769 ships from Salem made the voyage to every Spanish and Spanish-American harbor. This trade meant the mingling of peoples, tongues, grammars, books and dictionaries. Recognizing the significance of the Spanish language and culture *Franklin* arranged for the inclusion of Spanish in the course of study of the Philadelphia

Academy in 1766.⁸ In 1780 Jefferson insisted that Spanish be studied at some universities. Instruction in Spanish was offered in New York as early as 1735.⁹ An important step was made forward in 1751 when *Garrat Noel*, the first grammarian of the Spanish language in America, issued *A Short Introduction to the Spanish Language*. The precious collections of the archives and libraries, such as that of the Philadelphia Library Company, the Logonian Library, the American Philosophical Society, the New York Society Library and especially the New York Historical Society Library brought Spanish America close to many readers and specialists.

In the eighteenth century the two great channels, Spain and New Spain, cannot be precisely measured, the two sources were essentially inseparable. Yet in the sum total of higher influences (books, magazines, libraries, collections) the finger already pointed the colonies rather than the mother country, but the more distinguished intellectual influences came direct from the Peninsula.

In the American literature of the eighteenth century, a literature primarily of state papers, religious tracts, essays and satires, there were no figures like *William Hickling Prescott* who dedicated his articles, reviews, essays and books to Spanish and Spanish-American history, there was no ardent admirer of Spanish fiction comparable to *William Dean Howells* in his esteem of *Pérez Galdós* and *Juan Valera* and there was no lover of Spanish drama and poetry akin to *James Russel Lowell* in his devotion to *Lope de Vega*, *Calderón de la Barca* and *Cervantes*. But there were statesman, merchants, students and scholars, editors of magazines and newspapers, travelers and members of learned societies who touched in their own ways the rich, intricate mosaic of Spanish culture and reproduced a fragment of it in their own microcosm of American thought. Out of all the miscellaneous and scattered cultural contacts new concepts evolved. The authors used Spanish scenes, characters and incidents, and as they wrote they expressed these new concepts or themes: the descriptive essay, the epical treatment of the Conquest, the idealization of Columbus, the theme of the noble savage and the colonial versions of *Cervantes'* satire.¹⁰

The first of these attitudes was an intense curiosity, revealing itself in the *descriptive essay, article or letter* describing the external aspects of Spain and Spanish America. Though the era of travel books on Spain was still in the future, the country with its people, scenery and customs is discussed with some objectivity in the letters and articles of *David Humphreys*, *Thomas Jefferson*, *John Jay* and *John Adams*. In this genre in early American literature *Crèvecoeur* is a classic who writes sometimes from firsthand knowledge and usually with a simple eloquence. His portraits of the Spaniard are approximate and probably mirror more than his own opinion: a typical evaluation

from an eighteenth-century American. He shows Spain as a picturesque but bigoted conqueror, as a treacherous, brutal colonizer.

The second type of writing inclines to romanticize Spain the conqueror or to celebrate its rulers as the transmitters of civilization into the New World. Even if the sympathy of the author is with the Aztec or native Indian, the splendor of Spain glows in the narratives. *The epic treatment of the Conquest* is mainly apparent in the poetry and drama of the period. Even the poetry of *Joel Barlow*, who hated Spain, is sometimes under the spell of the conquistadores. His republicanism painted the Spanish foe as *Milton* painted Satan: majestic and heroic. Throughout this period the attraction of romantic Spanish subjects continued. *William Dunlap's Don Carlos*, an adaptation from *Schiller*, was a favorite on the New York stage.¹¹ *Dunlap* produced three other plays: *The Virgin of the Sun*, *Pizarro in Peru*, *The Death of Rolla*, and an opera, *The Knight of the Guadalquivir* on Spanish and Spanish-American themes.¹² Theatre-goers could see *Susanna Haswell Rowson's Slaves in Algiers*, whose plot is based upon the tale of the captive in *Don Quixote*.¹³

Eighteenth century poetry invoked the bold and semi-mythical Columbus and his voyages in spite of the fact that only a little was known about him. The main sources regarding the great discoverer were the life by his son *Fernando* and the narratives by *Las Casas*. *Joel Barlow* and *Philip Freneau* initiated in American literature the endless series of narratives, tales and verses on Columbus. In creating the first version of his moralizing epic poem in heroic couplets, *The Vision of Columbus* (1787). *Barlow* became, as he was called later, the father of Columbian poetry. *Barlow* was not the first American poet to celebrate an idealized Columbus. *Freneau* had composed a poem, *Columbus to Ferdinand*, and thirteen years before *The Vision of Columbus* he finished his more important verse, *The pictures of Columbus, the Genoese*. The eighteen scenes of this poem are an ostosyllabic, five-stress verse with many real and fanciful episodes about the life of the explorer. *Freneau's* pseudoromantic monologue with Spanish backgrounds and Spanish characters was prophetic of many similar poems on Columbus in the nineteenth, and even in the twentieth century.

The white man had always been interested in the mystic ways of life of the Indian. Americans had already heard legends of powerful princes and chiefs, gentle races, friendly people living in nature, with wise governments, beautiful and characteristic cultures of their own. The concept of "*the noble savage*", as he was called in the eighteenth-century Europe, appeared in European literature, too. *Rousseau*, *Montaigne* and *Chateaubriand* moved in this world. *Bessenyei* revived the Hungarian noble savage in his *Travel of Tarimenezs*. Encouragement for this illusion could come from England,

besides France and Spain. In the last quarter of the century some Americans were familiar with *Sir William Davenant's* opera *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru*. *Dryden's The Conquest of Granada* the first use of the term "noble savage" occurs here and with *Coleridge's Osorio*. The noble savage appeared in the eighteenth-century American literature in Spanish dress, too. In these stories and poems the Spaniard was the glittering villain and the native, the hopeless hero. *Acosta*, though was hard upon the Indian, idealized him on occasion. *Garcilaso de la Vega* spread these primitive fancies. To *Las Casas* the Indian was not only good but perfectible. The same idea can be found in other books, in *Richard Alsop's* translation of a history of Chile, in the verse of *Barlow* and *Freneau*, and in the plays of *Dunlap*.

We may finally mention a direct and powerful impact of Spain upon eighteenth-century American literature, namely, that of the Spanish classical writers: *Quevedo*, *Lope de Vega* and *Cervantes*. But only one writer, *Cervantes* enjoyed a significant attention among cultivated readers. He was known everywhere, even in the colonial literature, and his *Don Quixote's* triumph was complete in the eighteenth-century America. *Cervantes* and *The Knight of the Woeful Countenance* entered America before Shakespeare. His and his works' acceptance in the United States is so rich and varied that it deserves another study.

The nineteenth century was to witness the real dedication of talented writers to Spanish studies. During the next hundred and fifty years the major Spanish and Spanish-American influences developed so rapidly that the period, we discussed seems to be bare and poor. But these far-reaching effects of these early works, together with new influences and experiences could only mean a prolonged consecration for *Ticknor* and *Prescott*, an enrichment of his imaginative life for *Irving*, a gateway into the world of European romantic literature for Long fellow, a spiritual experience in French and Spanish writers for *Lowell*, a critical life for *Howells*, the arresting of a neglected tradition for *Bret Harte*, and a wide range of expression for *Ernest Hemingway*, *John Dos Passos*, *John Steinbeck* and many other twentieth-century writers.

NOTES

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