

EARL E. FITZ

REDISCOVERING

THE NEW WORLD

INTER-AMERICAN

LITERATURE IN

A COMPARATIVE

CONTEXT

Rediscovering the New World

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Inter-American
Literature in a
Comparative
Context



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Earl E. Fitz

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Rediscovering
the
New
World

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TO JULIANNE,

who knows and understands

Acknowledgments

* * * * *

I would like to thank my wife, Julianne, and our children, Ezra, Caitlin, Dylan, and Duncan, for allowing me to steal time from their lives (chiefly from several years' worth of Saturday and Sunday mornings) in order to write this book. Your extraordinary generosity made it happen, and I thank you for granting me time to work.

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Finally, a promise must here be kept. Some years ago, in 1979, I told the students of my (and Penn State's) first class in New World literature that one day I would write a book about this subject and that I would dedicate it to them. I applaud you now (as I did then) for having been daring enough in your college careers to try something new and different. Bravo.

Introduction

* * * * *

My purpose in writing this book was to show that, given the unique set of historical circumstances that governed the European discovery, conquest, and settlement of the New World, one could approach English and French Canada, the United States, Spanish America, and Brazil as constituting a community of literary cultures related to each other by virtue of their origins, their sundry interrelationships, and their sociopolitical, artistic, and intellectual evolutions. Their very real differences notwithstanding, the nations of the New World share enough of a common history that they can legitimately be studied as a unit, as different manifestations of the Americanism or New Worldism that each represents.

My methodology in this undertaking has been to identify several key issues that seem endemic to literature in the New World, to select certain representative texts from each of the five largest New World cultures (English Canada, French Canada, the United States, Spanish America, and Brazil), and to read these texts against each other. Since I begin with the Pre-Columbian era (and follow that with a discussion of the New World epic), there is a certain chronological order to the essays, though, as the later ones show, this was not a strategic part of my organizational plan.

One of several daunting problems encountered in an undertaking such as this was precisely the issue of text selection, for not all the works that relate to any given topic could possibly be discussed. Given the multitude of issues and texts that are available for consideration, on what rationale does one pick certain ones over others? If five texts from, say, French Canadian and Brazilian literature speak to the same issue, how does the scholar make the proper selec-

tion, the one that will most thoroughly or accurately exemplify the issue under consideration?

I have sought as often as possible to compare canonical texts because I wished to show how each of the ten issues selected for study manifests itself within the most established and influential works of literature that the various New World cultures have to offer. At the same time, however, it was my intention to feature lesser-known works and works by women. Happily, these goals often coincided, as evidenced by the presence here of such outstanding writers as Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Gabrielle Roy, Anne Hébert, Gertrude Stein, Willa Cather, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Luisa Valenzuela, Clarice Lispector, and Nérida Piñón. Women are revolutionizing New World literature (as they are literature worldwide) and, without slighting male authors, I tried to cite as many important female authors and titles as I knew. Unjustifiable omissions are certain to have occurred and I apologize for these in advance.

Additionally, there is the thorny problem of depth. Once the representative textual selections are made, how, in the space of some forty manuscript pages, can one say something useful, revealing, or at least thought-provoking about the works being examined? An especially vexing aspect of this dilemma relates to the basic methodology employed; particular themes were chosen not merely because they were germane to all the New World cultures, but because they were primary features of the most "essential," most admired texts these cultures have to offer. I felt—and I continue to feel—that the issue of original literary insight notwithstanding, there is something to be gained by showing how the canonical works of New World literature reflect themes or ideas that are themselves fundamental to our better understanding of the entire Inter-American experience. It is my hope that what one loses in depth of treatment in these cases is outweighed by what one gains in breadth of coverage and in the comparative reassessment of established ideas. Thus, while in one sense it may be old hat to read such classics as *Huckleberry Finn* and *Facundo* in the context of the theme of civilization versus barbarism (chapter 10), in another it may be illuminating to compare these works with each other and to less well known Inter-American masterpieces such as *Agaguk* (which, on a crucial point, vividly contrasts with *Huckleberry Finn*), *Rebellion in the Backlands*, and *The Scorched-Wood People*.

A word, too, should be said about the immense bibliographic problem that confronts the scholar of Inter-American literature. Since most of the texts selected for closer examination are widely acknowledged masterpieces of their re-

spective cultures, each comes replete with an extensive bibliography. Multiplying this problem by at least five (and by more if we are considering the many Native American literatures available for study), I came to realize that it would be virtually impossible to cite anything like a thorough bibliography of each work in each chapter. Instead, seeking readability and fresh reactions, I have chosen to keep references to a bare minimum, citing only those that relate directly to my topics.

Recognizing the importance of bibliography, however (and its special significance for a rapidly growing new area of scholarship), I have nevertheless included a Selected Bibliography, a listing of books, parts of books, and essays that in one fashion or another deal with the issues of Inter-American letters. I hope these titles will be of some use to scholars already working in or coming to this exciting and fast-developing field.

In many ways it is easier to say what this book is not than to say what it is. It is not, for example, an exhaustive study of the texts cited. Nor does it pretend to offer in any sense a comprehensive literary history of the several New World cultures under consideration. Finally, it does not presume to anything even approximating a definitive statement concerning the principles or praxis of New World literature. It is, rather, an invitation to further study, if only to correct the errors undoubtedly being made here.

A collection of ten chapters dealing with issues germane to all the literatures of the Americas, *Rediscovering the New World* arose out of my belief that the concept of "American literature" is not the exclusive province of one nation, that it is a concept that would link together all the literatures of the New World. I do not argue, however, that, having cast American literature in this particular hemispheric context, one must study it only in this fashion, for there are other approaches yet to be considered. Neither, finally, do I wish to imply that New World literature must in any sense be studied in isolation or that it developed devoid of any connection with Europe, for to do so would be patently absurd. What I have tried to show is that a great many problems of theme, form, and period resonate throughout the literature of the Americas and that, since the late fifteenth century, these have reflected the ongoing struggles of New World nations and cultures to define who and what they are.

Keenly aware of the daunting obstacles ahead, I initially despaired, feeling that they could not be overcome, at least not by me. To accept such a state of affairs, however, was tantamount to seeing the demise of the entire project, that being a condition I could not abide. The only alternative, therefore, was to

forge ahead and make every effort to avoid the pitfalls as often as possible. The reader of these essays has my sincere apologies for those all too frequent moments when I fail to do this as well as I should have.

Fully conscious, then, of both the theoretical and the practical problems inherent in the kind of vast comparative study I had in mind, I began in January 1986 with the following plan: I would select ten topics that seemed especially significant to literature as it has developed in the New World; I would mention as many texts as I knew of that address these issues but (in nearly all cases) I would select only one or two texts from each New World literary culture to compare and contrast with the others; and, finally, I would strive to be as concise as possible in my critical commentary, hoping (instead of offering a series of close readings) first to show the reader what I had seen and, second, to entice her or him to investigate further, to read in their entirety the texts commented on only briefly here.

It is thus as an introduction to a fascinating and fertile new field of literary inquiry that this book is written, for it was conceived and developed more in the exploratory spirit of the French Canadian voyageur than in the conquering spirit of the conquistador. I trust, therefore, that the reader will regard the material discussed here as my attempt to paddle through some of the literary waterways of the New World and to report on what I have seen and experienced.

As the entire field of Inter-American literary relations continues to evolve, as I am sure it will, it is my hope that *Rediscovering the New World* will inspire other, better studies. If so, its writing will have been justified.

Contents

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Acknowledgments, ix

Introduction, xi

1. The Pre-Columbian Era, 1
2. The Narratives of Discovery
and Conquest, 24
3. The New World Epic, 48
4. The Theme of Miscegenation, 70
5. Refining the New World Novel:
Henry James and Machado de Assis, 95
6. The Five (Six?) Faces of
American Modernism, 121
7. In Quest of an American Identity, 146
8. Regionalism as a Shaping Force, 169
9. Solitude: The Evolution of an
American Literary Motif, 191
10. The Conflict between Civilization
and Barbarism, 211

Afterword, 233

Notes, 235

Selected Bibliography, 253

Index, 269

1

The Pre-Columbian Era

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Oral in its mode of transmission, the literature of the Pre-Columbian era is difficult to assess. With so much of it lost forever, the literary scholar is forced to rely on works and fragments of works that have evolved through centuries of change. Additionally, there are the related problems of translation and performance, for, as Ursula K. Le Guin has written, "reading an oral piece translated from its original language to English, and from voice to print, is like reading a musical score: you have to know a lot before you can hear what's happening. On the page, oral literature seems stiff and 'primitive,' because it's less than half there; it's only the notation of a performance."¹

Yet in spite of these obstacles, the student of Pre-Columbian literature is encouraged by two facts: first, the Pre-Columbian era possessed not only a literature but one that ranged from the elementary to the highly sophisticated; and second, this vital and diverse native literature is undergoing something of a renaissance in the twentieth century. In various forms and in various ways, the rediscovery of American literature's ancient roots has proven to be an event of immense cultural significance for several New World republics. This movement is especially active in those Latin American countries like Mexico, Brazil, Guatemala, and Peru that still enjoy strong Indian populations, but it is also an important phenomenon in countries like Canada and the United States, which are likewise rediscovering their Native American heritage.

Were it needed, a third reason for undertaking a study of Pre-Columbian literature would be that no truly comprehensive examination of Inter-American letters could be possible without attempting at least to describe the nature of literature as it existed and evolved in the Americas during the approximately

twenty thousand years that elapsed before the Europeans first set foot on the New World shores. American literature did not begin, as is all too commonly thought, with the discovery writings of such explorers as Columbus, Jacques Cartier, Pedro Alvares de Cabral, and John Smith. It began far earlier, with the songs, stories, dances, and dramatic productions of such peoples as the Chipewewa, Choctaw, Osage, Pawnee, Sioux, Iroquois, and Papago, the Zuñi, Nootka, Kwakiutl, Inuit (Eskimo), Aztec, Maya, and Inca. Even the names by which we know some of these peoples today, the Zuñi (Spanish) and the Iroquois (French), for example, suggest the almost always violent impact the Europeans had upon these vastly different Native American cultures.

As a result, it does not surprise us to recognize how integral the issues of influence and reception have been to the ongoing process of intercultural literary development. In a living and regenerative fashion, then, much twentieth-century American literature has returned to its vibrant Pre-Columbian roots. The literary scholar who would trace the evolution of Inter-American literature must therefore begin at the real beginning, with the arrival of the first people on the single huge land mass that, since the sixteenth century, we have known as America.

Anthropologists tell us that the first "Americans" were probably Ice Age people from Asia who, following animal herds across the Bering land bridge, crossed over into the New World between fifteen thousand and thirty thousand years ago. The descendants of these Asian Cro-Magnons would, in one of the great misnomers of history, become known as American "Indians." By approximately twelve thousand years ago these people had fanned out to the south and east so that they spread over all of the land mass eventually to be called North America. Still later, some ten thousand years ago, descendants of these people finally reached the southernmost tip of South America. The Americas have been thoroughly peopled, then, for approximately ten thousand years. As a consequence, there is a sense in which American culture—and therefore American literature—can be said to be at least ten thousand years old.

So if the world "discovered" by the Europeans was new to them, it was not to the indigenous peoples already living here. Indeed, they, the true "discoverers" of the New World, possessed by the year 1492 an ancient world, one "based on a distinct concept of the universe. Tula, Teotihuacan, Monte Alban, Uxmal, Chichen Itzá, México-Tenochtitlan were all great centers of learning, having shared the wisdom of thousands of generations of pre-Columbian man."²

When one considers the radically differing terrains that the Americas offer—vast deserts and jungles, mountain ranges and grassy plains, frigid polar regions

and sweltering tropical zones—it is easy to understand how not only diverse cultures but diverse literatures would have developed. As one studies these cultures, however, it becomes apparent that the three most complex Pre-Columbian cultures—those of the Mayas, the Aztecs, and the Incas—also produced the most sophisticated literatures. Some have argued that the Zapotecs, another advanced tribal group, even had a system of writing and that the Aztecs and Mayas, with their paper “books” and elaborate glyphs, were beginning to experiment with phonemic writing. Based on the oldest known literary works that we have from these different Pre-Columbian civilizations, there can be little doubt that the literature of the Aztecs, the Mayas, and the Incas was of a singularly high level of achievement, much of it on a par with the best European literature of the day.

Oral in nature, the literature of the Pre-Columbian era was characterized by such essentially poetic devices as euphony, imagery, symbolism, long and short pausing, cadence, timing, volume, repetition, parallelism, assonance, consonance, contrast, alliteration, and onomatopoeia.³ Although there seems to have been no shortage of prosaic or dramatic literature, poetry does appear to have been the form that consistently produced the most exceptional efforts. Reflecting its oral expression and its social orientation, poetry for the aboriginal Americans was virtually synonymous with song. Throughout the New World, Pre-Columbian Americans showed themselves to be remarkable poets, singers of songs whose best work was richly evocative, succinct, and revelatory of the spirit of both the singer and the sharer. In contrast to written literature, the songs and stories of the Pre-Columbian era were commonly meant to be performed aloud in a communal exchange of intracultural revitalization between the performer and the audience. Structurally, we see (or hear) in this literature a constant reliance on repetition and parallelism, features fully characteristic also of the best oral traditions of Western civilization, including the Greek. One need not seek a Pre-Columbian Homer, however, to justify the worth of Pre-Columbian literature, the quality of which can be easily demonstrated by recognizing its elaborate structurings, its subtle techniques, and its varied thematics.

Critics believe that the early Americans viewed words as sacred entities that enjoyed a divine existence predating such natural phenomena as the earth, sun, and moon. Indeed, words were thought to possess so much magical force that they alone could have brought the physical world into existence. Margot Astrov has written that this important facet of Pre-Columbian literature is a “succinct statement of the Indian’s relation to the ‘word’ as the directing agency that stands powerfully behind every ‘doing’, as the reality above all tangible reality.”⁴

With this latter thought recalling Plato's theory of forms, Astrov states that "it is the thought and the word that stand face to face with the conscience of the native, not the deed."⁵

Because the aboriginal singers accorded such reverence to words, the poetry that they produced was judged to have the power to bring about a desired effect. Words were seldom used as mere embellishment, and this resulted in the creation of a literature possessed of a strong and dynamic social dimension. Nowhere is this social aspect of Native American poetry more clearly expressed than in the songs of healing and the songs of germination, fertility, and growth, the two categories of American Indian songs that outnumber all the others.⁶ In *Chippewa Music*, Frances Densmore offers two examples that clearly demonstrate this basic social dimension. The first song, very short in its written English translation, is as follows: "The end only I am afraid of." In this work, a young man expresses a vision he has had in which the trees surrounding him are singing that they fear nothing except the winds.⁷ The young man, a warrior, identifies animistically with the trees (that is, with the natural world) and in so doing prepares himself spiritually for his possible death on the battlefield. Like the trees with which he identifies, he will fear the wind, but by chanting the words of his song he will concentrate on the trees and thereby control his fear.

The second song, reminiscent of haiku, also shows a close and vital connection between the singer and the natural world that surrounds him:

Sometimes
I go about pitying myself
While I am carried by the wind
Across the sky.⁸

Here, as Astrov notes (paraphrasing the explanation of Densmore's Native American interpreter), "The dreamer becomes the companion of the swirling winds beneath the sky—torn away from his tribesmen, and therefore suffering, but close to the place where the powers dwell."⁹

Relating directly to the sacred quality of the word, these songs of personal vision and dream were deeply private creations. Expressive of a singer's innermost thoughts and emotions, such moving compositions are worthy additions to Western literature's venerable tradition of lyric poetry. Some, such as those produced by the brilliant Texcocoan poet-king Nezahualcōyotl, are, as we shall see, complex philosophical meditations on the vagaries of life and the mystery of death. Recalling the English metaphysical poets as well as the Greek tragedians, the poetry of Nezahualcōyotl is slowly beginning to gain renown as the

most outstanding single-author body of literature in the known Pre-Columbian world.

Arguably the most distinctive feature of Pre-Columbian literature, the overwhelming belief in the word as a sacred object produces a kind of magical literature that, as in the magical realism of later writers like Gabriel García Márquez, John Nichols, Robert Kroetsch, and Miguel Angel Asturias, links its user to the mysterious but life-giving forces of nature that surround us. As much Pre-Columbian literature shows, the singer and the audience expect not to control or manipulate reality but to enter into it, to join with it and thereby become one with the universe. Reflecting its philosophical orientation as well as constituting a basic Native American aesthetic principle,¹⁰ the thematic emphasis of this poetry is on kinship, balance, and harmony rather than on conflict and aggression. Because poems and songs of this kind stress equanimity both within oneself and with one's world, they also show how for people of the Pre-Columbian era (and in contrast to Saussurean linguistic theory) the word and its referent were indivisibly fused together. Words, sacred in essence, function in a way that is important to the stability of one's internal and external world. Songs were often used to invoke the forces of nature and thereby bring about some wished-for result such as rain, victory in war, or the healing of a sick or injured person.

Because in the Pre-Columbian world language was widely judged to be sacred, we find little use of irony or ambiguity in its literature. The reverence with which the word was held, in addition to the crucial cultural bonding of past, present, and future that occurs during a performance, precludes it. The literature of the Pre-Columbian people shows, moreover, an overwhelming sense of the necessity to use language only to reveal truth, never to deceive or dissemble.¹¹ The word was to be used in trust and mutual understanding between the singer and the audience and between people and their world. This sense of unity between the word and its object highlights a fundamental difference between much of the literature of the late twentieth century and that of the Pre-Columbian era.

As Karl Kroeber has noted, a final distinguishing feature of Native American poetry is that it is essentially metonymic and especially synecdochic, rather than metaphoric like most of traditional Western poetry. Kroeber argues that the synecdochic nature of oral American Indian poetry reinforces its already intentionally strong social and cultural dimensions. If this is true, it would substantiate his contention that "all Native American poetry is radically different from Western European poetry."¹²

A thematic approach also reveals a great deal about the nature of Pre-Columbian literature. Critics have broken this body of work down into five major thematic categories, examples of which can be found in virtually all known American Indian cultures: songs of healing; songs of germination, fertility, and growth; songs of personal vision and expression; death songs; and creation songs.

The first two categories (healing songs and songs of germination, growth, and fertility) are the dominant categories, the ones that generate the most examples for our Inter-American comparative context. Since the songs of the Pre-Columbian people were so intimately bound up with the functioning of their societies and with their ability to sustain themselves on this earth, it requires no stretch of the imagination to see why songs from these categories would be so important and so numerous. In *Chippewa Music 1*, Densmore records the following healing song, which Astrov calls “the healing song par excellence”:

You will recover; you will walk again.
It is I who say it; my power is great.¹³

Though the sacred word is actually held to be the curative agent, the mechanism by which the healing process is set in motion is the singer's chant, the compelling and melodic repetitions in which the images of peace, tranquillity, and balance are unceasingly invoked, as in the process of hypnosis. The singer's chant, rhythmically accompanied by percussion and wind instruments, slowly works to relax and mesmerize the hearer, psychologically transporting the injured or ill person into the realm of pure beauty and perfection that is the American Indian's concept of the universe. Through the shaman's chant, built around the technique of repeating the sacred words, the hearer is transported spiritually into the cosmic force that, in the beginning, gave rise to all living things on the earth.

Another outstanding example of a Native American song of healing is cited by C. Daryll Forde in his *Ethnography of the Yuma Indians*:

Your heart is good.
[The Spirit] Shining Darkness will be here.
You think only of sad unpleasant things,
You are to think of goodness.
Lie down and sleep here.
Shining Darkness will join us.