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THE GENESIS OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE:

A MEXICAN TRIBUTARY¹

**ACLA
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As a non-American, as a non-Mexican, I shall begin my brief remarks on Comparative Literature in this happy encounter at this historic location by invoking a non-French philosopher from France. The relevance to the United States of Mexico and to the United States of America of this outsider's overture from Emmanuel Levinas I hope will soon become clear:

Outside the other is the third party. He is also the other, also a neighbor. But which is the closest proximity? Is it not always exclusive? Who then is the first one to whom I must respond, the first to be loved? There must be knowledge of such things! It is the moment of justice, inquiry and knowledge. It is the moment of objectivity motivated by justice. *The unique incomparables must be compared.* We must, out of respect for the categorical imperative or the other's rights as expressed by his face, un-face human beings,

sternly reducing each one's uniqueness to his individuality in the unity of the genre [species], and let universality rule.²

The comparison of “the unique incomparables that must be compared,” as Levinas’ injunction would have it, has invariably occurred in human history when such unique incomparables come close enough in proximity to engender a relation between them. We call such propinquity an encounter, *un encuentro*, in the Spanish vernacular which, unlike its Anglo-American counterpart, also has the nuanced lexis of *desencuentro*, a nuance that limns and modulates the historical quality of encounter and signals the historical character of the relation that might result from it. I take this lexical discrepancy between the Mexican Spanish and the U.S. English to be symptomatic of more than a linguistic accident. I take it to be a historically conditioned sensitivity and the result of Mexican culture’s more complex heterogeneity, its much older and more intricate historical experience with asymmetrical encounters.

Inasmuch as Comparative Literature has its genesis and its definition in its mediate role between and among relations that invariably ensue from encounters, the doubly voiced and subtly modulated Mexican idiom could represent a more urgent discursive locus and a more compelling situation for our comparatistic discipline. This primal moment of comparison—the encounter—, by virtue of becoming simultaneously dual in Mexico’s Spanish as *encuentro* and as *desencuentro*, it takes on a certain historical specificity in the context of the New World. It begins with the discovery of Europeans on Caribbean shores by the Taino natives of the island of Guanahani in the early morning of October 12, 1492, an event conventionally referred to in English as the *discovery* and in Spanish as the *descubrimiento*. As with *encounter*, however, the

Mexican language and philosophical thought fold back this phenomenon of the discovery and double it over itself in what is referred to in technical philosophy as an *analectical exegesis*. Thus, since the Mexican philosopher and our admired colleague Enrique Dussel coined this technical usage for elucidating the historical morphology of the New World as a philosophical problem, it is impossible to utter the term discovery, *descubrimiento*, without invoking its perpetual and inevitable supplement, *encubrimiento*, defined by Mexico's other well known philosopher of history, Leopoldo Zea, as "a gigantic cover-up over identity begun on October 12, 1492."³ And it is impossible not to posit the vital question for comparative studies as invariably inflected by this philosophical discourse: *Qué encubre el descubrimiento?*, roughly translated into English as "What does the discovery cover up?" History as a cover-up, then, makes indispensable the intervention of comparative philosophy and, no less so, of comparative literature for the negotiation of the relational complex we often casually refer to as an encounter. In this sense, comparative literature as epistemic construct, as discursive negotiation, and as mediating agency emerged in history with one of the most momentous encounters in the history of the human species, the encounter between the Old World and the New, or what of necessity emerged as Old and New Worlds as a consequence of that historic event.

It is in the historical context of this semantic ambiguity and political philosophy as challenge to comparative literature that I have begun these remarks by invoking Emmanuel Levinas and his injunction: "**The unique incomparables must be compared.** We must, out of respect for the categorical imperative or the other's rights as expressed by his face, un-face human beings, sternly reducing each one's uniqueness to his individuality in the unity of the genre [the species], and let universality rule." The

Kantian categorical imperative invoked by Levinas is founded in the Biblical golden rule. And suggestive transposition of this imperative to the project of comparison, where, he says, “the unique incomparables must be compared,” points to the ethical urgency of our discipline of comparative literature, a dimension that is often elided, as are the histories of primal scenes of encounter in which our comparatistic academic exercises have their genesis. It is in the context of this ethical imperative that is deemed categorical by philosophy, but is often overlooked by literary exegesis, that the history of literary and textual culture in Mexico is inevitably comparatistic. This Mexican historical inevitability should awaken our comparative endeavors to the importance of the materiality of literature and the repercussive nature of comparative literary studies. I shall specify how this occurs in the Mexican context shortly. For now, I wish to point out yet another significant semantic redoubling when Levinas is translated into Spanish. In the transformations that attend the comparatistic encounter, Levinas tells us, the human interface must be countenanced through the categorical imperative in a three-step process that defines our comparative task: 1) It would have us be aware of “the other’s rights as expressed by his face,” 2) “un-face human beings, sternly reducing each one’s uniqueness to his individuality in the unity of the genre,” by which Levinas’ French philosophical cognate means “the species,” and 3) once the first two steps are taken, then, “let universality rule.” We assume a certain degree of automaticity for this process in doing our comparative analyses. But in this triple step that we often take for granted something is gained in translation when we read it in Spanish, especially in the all-important second or pivotal middle step. The stripping bare of the face of “each one’s uniqueness to his individuality in the unity of the species” echoes, no doubt, the unmasking of the

hypocrites, the baring of the unique persona so that an individual of the human species could be revealed. In the Spanish, the process resonates with the Mexican philosophers Leopoldo Zea and Enrique Dussel and their insight into the ineluctable doubling of encounter or *encuentro* as *desencuentro* and of discovery or *descubrimiento* as *encubrimiento*, or cover-up. Thus, Emmanuel Levinas' categorical injunction to "un-face human beings" (note that he says "un-face," not "un-mask") in this historical interface is translatable as *descarar lo humano*, which, for those of you who know Spanish, the *descaramiento* carries with it the historically nuanced imputation of human responsibility and shamelessness that resonate in the noun *descaro* and in the adjective *descarado*. For Levinas, and for the philosophical practitioners of the categorical imperative such as Zea and Dussel, this exposure as the requisite middle step to the third stage, namely, "let[ing] universality rule," should teach us something we ought to always keep in mind as practitioners of comparative literature, namely, that our objects of comparison and their cultural genesis occlude something less than innocent and often something more than transgressive, or even criminal, by the criterion of the categorical imperative of treating others as we would have others treat us. This could be the most important lesson we as practitioners of a modern discipline called comparative literature might take away from the history of asymmetries and their baneful consequences that mark the culture, literary corpus, and philosophical discourse of Mexico. In this sense, I opt for speaking of the "genesis," rather than the "origin," of comparative literature, inasmuch as the circumstances that give rise to the beginnings of the discipline, like the discipline itself, are culturally marked and not free of transgression; nor should they be immune to imputability for the historical acts of commission that define us.

In his 1992 lectures in Frankfurt, Germany, subsequently published under the title *1492: El encubrimiento del otro: hacia el origen del “mito de la modernidad”* (*The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of the “Other” and the Myth of Modernity Thought*),⁴ Enrique Dussel sees that momentous encounter of 1492 as the genesis of what he terms *transmodernity*, which he defines as an initial “step toward a transmodern *worldhood*”⁵ for Europe and for what will have become America. This is the greatest challenge for a comparative discipline such as ours that emerges from and institutionalizes this “step toward a transmodern *worldhood*.” It is also comparative literature’s greatest peril, since our disciplinary discourse is forged in the grammar and structural thought of this *transmodernity*, a concept on which Dussel elaborates in his contrapuntal engagement with the postmodernist philosophy of Gianni Vattimo.⁶ By Dussel’s reckoning, our field and its tenets are continuous and coterminous, if not coeval, with that foundational moment of “transmodern *worldhood*.” The contemporary avatars of this “*worldhood*” go by the highly debatable terms of *globalization*, *planetaryity*, and *world literature*, though, they do so somewhat neglectful of the primal scene of this lexical complex and the institutional discursive formations, which for us as comparatists has its genesis in the history of the interface between the New World and the Old, a foundational history on which Mexican comparative literature, comparative philosophy, and comparative historiography focus our attention with certain diligence.

Our obsessive invocation of “the Other,” now proclaimed on an industrial scale through books, articles, conference papers, and sundry pedagogies, is put into question by what Dussel identifies as the “irrational myth” of a self-justifying logic that was loosed on the indigenous populations of what was deemed the New World then and the “two-

thirds world,” which is the global south, today by the successor logic of that “irrational myth.” Today, this same logic and its performative contradictions operate as a process called globalization, propelled by the Northern (that is, European and Anglo-American) inappealable absolute right, in Hegelian terms, to bear Spirit through history and furnish the form with which to frame and define the material that is the unformed. That unformed material had been called, oddly, but less than surprisingly, the Third World, but which, by Enrique Dussel’s re-calculation, is really the “two-thirds of the world.” And this reckoning by thirds is at the heart of the encounter and the discovery at the end of the fifteenth century, a historical moment in which the cosmos consisted of three parts (Europe, Asia, and Africa), with the newly encountered territories troubling that neat cosmography and its triune numerology. As extraordinary spectral supplement that suddenly confronted the *worldhood* of the time, this encounter proved disconcerting enough to be a *desencuentro*, a discovery whose shock and ensuing consequences somehow had to be covered over, thus transforming the *descubrimiento* into an even more momentous project of *encubrimiento*, as Leopoldo Zea and Enrique Dussel have described it.

By this light, the encounter between worlds is not only asymmetrical but highly problematic because what was non-European was not deemed to be a world then, just as the *worldhood* of the non-North today is deemed to be little more than an object or a market. At best, it is taken as a subsumable *worldhood* that can be appropriated and molded, as the unformed material to be formed and civilized, liberated, or democratized and, at worst, turned into target for pulverization through the most advanced armaments the world has ever known. By Dussel’s reckoning, our modernism and post-modernism

date back to that founding moment of “transmodern *worldhood*” whose processes continue to unfold. Thus, says Dussel, “[f]or the modern *ego*, the inhabitants of the land never appeared as Other, but as the possession of the Same to be conquered, colonized, modernized, civilized, as if they were the modern *ego*’s material.”⁷

The inevitable violence that ensues from such incursion into someone else’s world is still attributed today not to the invaders but to the resistance of the material, to the obduracy of the object of invasion, conversion, liberation, or civilization, with the most recent manifestation of such brutality and its attendant carnage characterized by one imperial operative as “the birth-pangs of democracy.” And one of the media instigators of the latest atrocity now in its full flowering in the Old World’s cradle of human civilization recently would extend the parturient metaphor by declaring, “to place the blame on [America] is simply perverse....Iraq is their country. We midwived their freedom. They chose civil war.”⁸ In his time, the Jesuit humanist, Greek scholar, and student of Aristotle Gines de Sepúlveda expressed this burden of the enlightened and their sacrifice on behalf of the unregenerate natives in similar terms in his 1550-1551 debate in Valladolid, Spain, with the Dominican Bartolomé de las Casas, the first resident Bishop of Chiapas. Dussel, in fact, cites part of Sepúlveda’s argument as epigraph for the chapter in his book I am referring to here. Part of that epigraph from Sepúlveda, which makes him an unquestionable precursor of Hegel, and today would clearly qualify him as an expert commentator on FOX Television, NPR, BBC, and CNN, reads: “This war and conquest are just first of all because these barbaric, uneducated, and inhuman [natives] are by nature servants. Naturally, they refuse the governance which more prudent, powerful, and perfect human beings offer and which would result in their great benefit.

By natural right and for the good of all, the material ought to obey the form, the body the soul, the appetite the reason, the brutes the human being, woman her husband, the imperfect the perfect, and the worse the better.”⁹

The debate between Sepúlveda and Las Casas sixty years after Columbus’ landfall in 1492 and thirty years after Tenochtitlán’s conquest by Hernando Cortés in 1521 was intended to adjudicate the possible humanity of the indigenous peoples of the New World. What was in question in the debate between Sepúlveda and Las Casas was not the conquest itself but the nature of it, to wit, whether the conquest should be defined as a legitimate enslavement because the natives were barbarians, or whether the object of the conquest should be their conversion to the true faith because they were rational and, therefore, suitable for evangelization. In either case, the native peoples were to be the object of dispossession and the repositioning of their *worldhood* according to the conquerors’ criteria. All interaction between the Europeans and the indigenes thereafter would be filtered through the lens of that adjudication, whether by well-meaning Franciscans such as Gerónimo de Mendieta and Bernardino de Sahagún, who calibrated the Indians’ humanity with reference to the standard of the apostolic age of the Christian Church and attempted to safeguard native languages and texts, or by the likes of the Bishop of Yucatan Diego de Landa, also a Franciscan. A decade after the Valladolid debate Bishop de Landa would commit the Maya codices to the pyre on a massive scale (only 27 codices by the Bishop’s admission, 99 times that many by other accounts) in July of 1562 in an attempt to root out the devil by fire. In any case, whether in the instance of the apostolic or the pyromaniac missionaries, cultural encounter and textual encounter are simultaneous, with the textuality of the Aztec and Maya codices and

collective memory screened through the writing technologies of the European missionaries—Sahagún is the author of the *Florentine Codex*, a twelve-book compendium with a Náhuatl dictionary completed in 1569 that is our most complete source on the culture of the Aztec peoples. Bishop Diego de Landa, ironically enough, left for posterity a Maya syllabary called *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, which made the three Maya codices that escaped his pyromaniac zeal decipherable at mid-twentieth century by the Russian linguist Yuri Knorosov.

The violence that accompanies such encounters appears to be highly consistent across time and geography. This historical constancy should make the task of comparative literature somewhat more predictable. In the case of the New World and its American republics, that endeavor consists in the critical and theoretical reflection on what begins as a historical dialectic between civilization and barbarity, a genesis compellingly and perennially apt to the facts of a New World history in which the acts of civilization and barbarism are the monopoly of neither the civilized or the barbarians. Thus, the burning of the Maya codices, the textual compendium of the collective memory of that culture, is a-synchronically mirrored in the ransacking of Iraq's National Museum in Baghdad in the Third-Millennium-year of 2003 under the watchful eye of the invading American army. The diligent investigations of this latest *desencuentro* by the Venezuelan scholar Fernando Baez were reported most recently in the *Asia Times* on Tuesday, February 17, 2005, by the Inter Press Service reporter Humberto Márquez: "One million books, 10 million documents and 14,000 archaeological artifacts have been lost in the US-led invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq—the biggest cultural disaster since the descendants of Genghis Khan destroyed Baghdad in 1258."¹⁰ The literature or textual

culture that is to issue from this latest *desencuentro* is already adumbrated in the work of such twentieth-century authors as the Palestinian poet Mahmood Darwish and the Iraqi poet Mohammed Mahdi al-Jawahiri, to whom the Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno could have well applied his famous palinode of 1951: “Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems.”¹¹

Beyond the often disembodied, formal attributes of comparable texts, comparative literary studies have begun reaching for the historical contextualization of cultural encounters and their human consequences, notably through such formulations as *transculturation*. Like Dussel’s *transmodernity* and its performative contradictions, *transculturation* carries with it its own “irrational myths,” to use Dussel’s terms, once again. The Cuban Fernando Ortiz, the originator of this concept that is now adapted, at times with a certain forgetfulness of its conflictive morphology, signaled the stresses and tensions of this concept through the title of his 1941 treatise: *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y azúcar*. The operative term here is *contrapunteo*, which, for the musically literate, resonates percussively in contestations and, often, in violent contradictions. Such transcultural relations are repercussive in all parties encountering each other, though, as we see quite clearly in the history of Mexico and the other Americas, the effects are uneven, the consequences asymmetrical, the results disproportionate, and the benefits unequal. The term *desencuentro*, as we have already noted, encodes and signals all of these disparities, whose conflictive dimensions we have tended to elide and gloss over due to a certain fascination with such notions as hybridity, cultural fusion, and multiculturalism that tend to be the symptomatic manifestations of those historical

counterpoints. While such notions and their real-world embodiments do have their charm and assuaging qualities, these come at an undeniable cost. Monumental figures such as José Vasconcelos, the “teacher of the nation” for Mexican history, were to discover as much in their romanticization of *mestizaje* and idealization of a new cosmic race, which, of course, meant the erasure of races, identities, and histories as they already pre-existed the incursion of the more powerful in the asymmetry of the encounter.

The text culture of Mexico offers us some of the most aberrant chimeras that issue from these processes, starting with such colonial anomalies as the aptly named Domingo Francisco de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, commonly called Chimalpahin, *a secas*, who was born in Amecameca in the province of Chalco in 1579 and died in Mexico City in 1660. The distended name is symptomatic of the anxious and urgent transculturation that the conquerors of Mexico imposed on the indigenous populations, particularly the lettered class of *mestizo* or hybrid elites, who felt compelled to assimilate to the invading imperial culture, even as they were obliged to display and affirm the nobility of the indigenous branch of their lineage. This was in response to the promised emoluments the empire’s government held out for these elites that it felt were expedient in the administration of the empire and in the acculturation of the native peoples to the dominant norms of the conquerors and the colonists. The result of such transculturations was not Aztec *and* European; rather, it proved to be neither European, nor Aztec or Maya. And the resultant cultural hybrid, far from valued, was the object of disdain, if not downright contempt. Thus, the idealized phenomenon of cultural syncretism that comparative literature often sees as its ideal object of exegesis is not at all

a *synchresis* but a *catachresis*, often characterized, not without a certain political expediency, by such aesthetic categories as the *baroque*.¹²

This much we learn clearly from the history of Mexico as site of transculturation. The textual production of Chimalpahin is as suggestive in this regard as is his name. His writings, composed principally in the first decades of the seventeenth century, are amply articulate in this sense. His three texts, written primarily in Nahuatl, consist of his *Diario* for the years 1598 to 1615, the eight accounts of his *Diferentes historias originales*, which are certainly different, or diverse, and as original as his foundational history *Memorial breve acerca de la fundación de Culhuacán*. The itinerary of this textual corpus is just as compelling for comparatists who attempt to trace the fate of texts as fungible cultural objects and symbols of political transaction. Suffice it to say for now that the most important part of this corpus rests in Paris in the archives of La Bibliothèque Nationale. As for the content, Chimalpahin's transcultural peripeties find him entangled in the obduracy of a calendaric calculus he attempted to make congruent by synchronizing the Mexican calendar to the Gregorian calendar, the universal history of the Christian Church with the cosmogonic history of Mexico. Thus, Chichimecs end up having their origins in Europe, finding unmistakable traces of the Tower of Babel and of Babylon in Mexico, and making the evangelization of Aztec and Maya peoples the inevitable and providentially preordained errand of the Spanish monarchy and its Catholic Kings. Anomalous as all this might sound, Chimalpahin is not unique. We have, among others, Fernando Alvarado Tezozómoc, who was born shortly after Hernando Cortés' conquest of Tenochtitlán, and who authored the *Crónica mexicáyotle*, which narrates the history of the Mexica from their mythical origins to the arrival of the

Spaniards, and Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitle, who also called himself Fernando and, in 1524, that is, three years after the conquest of Tenochtitlán, also took the surname Cortés to go with his first name, thus becoming the complete *tocayo*, or namesake of the Conquistador.

The transcultural aberrations of these agents of cultural textuality aside, their significance resides in the fact that they had access to the codical sources that antedate the arrival of the conquering Europeans and, as such, they are our window to any pre-encounter and pre-conquest cultural and textual phenomena. As such, our basis of comparison can reach, however tenuously, to something other than the transculturated textual or cultural corpus that pre-exists the encounter and is corrupted by it. Through the distorted lenses of the encounter, when the nascent *transmodernity* suffuses the indigenous with its own “myths of irrationality” and performative contradictions, we might glimpse what was and might have been a semblance of cultural “authenticity,” though that authenticity was itself already complicated and compromised by the pre-conquest encounters among diverse indigenous peoples that converged in the territory we call Mexico. It is the rich history of these complex layerings and the intricate figures of their palimpsests that can be most instructive for the enterprise of comparative literature, an enterprise that is obliged by the Mexican primal scene of comparability to become at once political and archeological in its methodology. By which I mean that the comparisons on a horizontal axis of confluent, imbricated, and intermediated literary cultures is clearly not sufficient. Mexico’s history makes amply clear that comparative literature must make vertical biopsies, *tranches de vie*, that cut through sedimented

histories not only as texts, but also as inter-texts that betray and divulge life-world consequences on human beings as embodiment of superposed historical textualities.

While we might like to believe that all this goes without saying and that such *modus operandi* is now part of our disciplinary *sensus comunis*, in light of the range of practices under the rubric of comparative literature this may not be so. Such insight into cultural complexity was certainly only an intuition at that primal scene of Enlightenment discourse and social intercourse that is often identified as the genesis of what we traditionally identify as comparative literature. Mexico was also present at that incipient locus. I am referring to the Paris salon of Madame Récamier (Jeanne Françoise Julie Adelaide Récamier, 1777-1849), whose *soirées* included such notable figures as the Viscount Chateaubriand, Simón Bolívar and Bolívar's mentor Simón Rodríguez (born Simón Carreño, a.k.a. Samuel Robinson), the Jesuit Abbot Henri Grégoire, who coined the term "vandalism" (what today circulates as the shibboleth of "terrorism") and who proposed to the National Convention of 1794 the founding of the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers, the Baron Alexander von Humboldt, who took the New World's measurements for an emergent new science, and, not least, Madame Germaine de Stäel (née Necker), who comes by her immortality, in part, through her perpetually resonant quip upon meeting the Mexican *étranger* in this somewhat Edenic primal scene for comparative literature as we have come to know and practice it. As you might recall, Madame de Stäel said: "You come from a place that soon will begin to exist!" She was speaking to Fray José Servando Teresa de Mier Noriega y Guerra, a fugitive at the time from yet another prison of the Spanish Inquisition and quite adamant about his provenance—not from Mexico, he would insist, but from Anáhuac.¹³

I refer to the Paris salon of Madame Récamier as primal scene of our comparative literature because it represents a critical moment in the genesis of what we do as practitioners of comparative literature. Perhaps more symptomatically than programmatically, Madame Récamier's salon serves as pivotal link between the Enlightenment paradox that gave us differentials and particulars by focusing on universals, and the Romantic investments in national and nationalist specificities that delineated discrete fields of comparability for the emergent disciplines of modern philology, contrastive ethno-linguistics, and comparative literature. The Mexican, or *anahuence*, Fray Servando embodied that pivotal paradox, hence the immediate and historical resonance of his presence at that primal scene of comparatism. Fray Servando was himself on the threshold between, on the one hand, the universal history of the Imperial Church Triumphant in its American apostolic mission, which he saw as extending back to Saint Thomas the Apostle as vicar of Christ and as avatar of Quetzalcóatl in Mexico, as he would declare from the pulpit in his December 12, 1794 sermon on the Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, while, on the other hand, he would declaim some of the most radical republican precepts of independence in such missives to his countrymen as the “Carta de despedida a los mexicanos, escrita desde el Castillo de San Juan de Ulúa” (1820) [“Farwell to Mexicans, Written from the Fortress of San Juan de Ulúa”], which is, among other things, a screed on the letter “x,” and the “Memoria político-instructiva, enviada desde Filadelfia en agosto de 1821, a los gefes independientes de Anáhuac, llamado por los españoles Nueva España” [Memorandum of Political Instructions, Dispatched from Philadelphia in August 1821, to the Independent Leaders of Anáhuac, Called New Spain by the Spaniards]. His Guadalupan sermon of

1794 would earn him 29 years of repeated imprisonments and jail breaks on both sides of the Atlantic, while his 1821 Memorandum from Philadelphia would raise the hackles of the first and only emperor in the New World, His Royal Majesty Emperor Agustín Iturbide I of Mexico. This Napoleonic farce is hilariously narrated by our friend and distinguished colleague Rosa Beltrán in her 1995 novel *La corte de los ilusos*,¹⁴ where Fray Servando figures prominently as haunting revenant.

Embodiment of the founding paradox of comparative literature, Fray Servando symptomatically incarnates the performative contradictions that are implicit in our praxes as comparatists, namely, the pursuit of the differential in the common and the search for the generalizable universal through the particular. Most significantly, as vociferous contestant to the very Enlightenment contradictions he embodied, Fray Servando is constant reminder that our elucidations are more often continuous with the infra-history of humanity and its shadows than with the illustrious illumination of its Enlightenments. In his three-decade-long argument with the vestigial Medieval Church of the Spanish Empire, on the one hand, and the atrocities of Jacobin anti-clericalism on the other, he reminds us that our emancipatory institutions, no less than the benighted dungeons of the Inquisition, are governed not by the lettered but by the grammarians' orthography and by the grammatologists of dogma; that our "lettered city" is not the reign of what the Uruguayan critic Angel Rama described in a homonymous book *La ciudad letrada*,¹⁵ but the domain of what Fray Servando called the "covachuelos," roughly translatable as "cavemen," or "dungeon men," named for those whose governing dispatches during his time emanated from offices in the subterranean bowels of ministries and government palaces.¹⁶ These are the custodians of the governmentality whose calculus delineates the

frontiers and cartographies where the asymmetries of cultural encounters occur, encounters that inevitably lead to the relational disparities of comparatism, including the textual cultures that are the domain of comparative literature. It is there, in that subterranean domain that discoveries are turned into recoveries, where *descubrimiento* is transformed into *encubrimiento*, where history becomes a cover-up, as Leopoldo Zea and Enrique Dussel would have it. This is the “core” of the “ciudad letrada,” that Pascale Casanova has more recently identified as the universal capital of *La république mondiale des lettres*,¹⁷ the omphalos of our “denationalized” world literature in an age of globalization, where misrecognition and obliviousness to the world outside their now academic bureaus make it possible for the new species of *covachuelos* to do the work of “The World Republic of Letters” with ubiquitous efficiency and blithe innocence to the consequences of their diligence.

Mexico’s history and these Mexican tributaries of the mainstream that is comparative literature alert us to the fact that our own labors as comparatists inevitably partake of this cover-up, even as our grammatological verve strains to deconstruct the self-occluding constructs and to strip away the veils of the history we perpetuate, historiographically and otherwise. It is a sobering lesson in humility. And our wakefulness to its implicit ethics would have us be conscious of the degree to which we might be instrumentalized for delivering the *worldhood* of the worlds we compare to the nefarious bureaus of global hegemony. In this regard, Emmanuel Levinas’ injunction to “un-face human beings” perhaps should begin with each of us un-facing ourselves as prerequisite for facing our responsibility as practitioners of comparative literature. If we learn this much from Mexico’s contribution to the enterprise of comparative literature,

the discipline and its practitioners might be no less melancholy before the disparities of historical encounters, but we would be that much more sympathetic in our humanity.

¹ I draw on work in progress for my book “Memos from the Besieged City: Lifelines for Cultural Sustainability” for some of the remarks that follow.

² Emmanuel Levinas, “On Jewish Philosophy,” in *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 174. Emphasis mine.

³ Leopoldo Zea, “Identity: A Latin American Philosophical Problem,” *The Philosophical Forum* 20 (1988), p. 35.

⁴ Enrique Dussel, *1492: El encubrimiento del otro: hacia el origen del “mito de la modernidad”* (La Paz: Plural Editores, 1994). [*The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of the “Other” and the Myth of Modernity Thought*, trans. Michael D. Barber (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1995)].

⁵ Dussel, *The Invention*, p. 23.

⁶ Enrique Dussel, *Posmodernidad y transmodernidad. diálogos con la filosofía de Gianni Vattimo* (México: Publicaciones del ITESO, 1998).

⁷ Dussel, *The Invention*, p. 25.

⁸ Charles Krauthammer, “Who’s to Blame for the Killing,” *Washington Post*, Friday, February 2, 2007, p. A15 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/01/AR2007020101497.html>

⁹ Cited in Dussel, *The Invention*, p. 70.

¹⁰ See, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/GB17Ak01.html.

¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1966), p. 362. This statement of 1951 is a palinode to his 1949 remark in the essay “Commitment” that “to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” q.v., Adorno, “Commitment,” *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Francis McDonagh (London: Verso, 1977), pp. 177–195; 188. For an illuminating discussion of politics, society, and poetry in this context see, Kalliopi Nikolopoulou, “As If: Kant, Adorno, and the Politics of Poetry,” *MLN* 121.3 (2006), pp. 757-773.

¹² On the significance of baroque and neobaroque as aesthetic and historical categories with literary and political repercussions, see the ACLA 2007 Harry Levin Prize winning study by Lois Parkinson Zamora, *The Inordinate Eye: New World Baroque and Latin American Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

¹³ Servando Teresa de Mier Noriega y Guerra, “Carta de despedida a los mexicanos escrita desde el Castillo de San Juan de Ulua,” in *Escritos y memorias*, ed. Edmundo O’Gorman (México: Ediciones de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma, 1945), p. 35.

¹⁴ Rosa Beltrán, *La corte de los ilusos* (México: Grupo Editorial Planeta, 1995).

¹⁵ Angel Rama, *La ciudad letrada* (Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1984).

¹⁶ See Adolfo Arrijoja Vizcaíno, *Fray Servando Teresa de Mier: Confesiones de un guadalupano federalista* (México: Editorial Grijalbo, 2003), pp. 29 ff.

¹⁷ Pascale Casanova, *La république mondiale des letters* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1999).