

New Approaches to the novel: From *Terra Nostra* to twitter literature*

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Abstract This article addresses new approaches to the novel in the twenty-first century. It begins with an affirmation that even the most avant-garde of contemporary critics in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century share a commonality: a background in what was identified as “close reading” in the Anglo-American academic world and analyse de texte in French. After numerous declarations in recent decades about the death of the novel, the death of the author and the death of literary criticism, it is evident that the novel as a genre has survived, authors remain a subject of study, and new approaches are possible. The study of trauma in fiction (as introduced by Cathy Caruth and David Aberbach), as well as eco-criticism, are promising new points of departure. The required close reading implied by Twitter also opens up new possibilities.

Key words

Close reading, eco-criticism, trauma, twitter.

Nuevos enfoques a la novela: de Terra Nostra a la twitter-literatura

Resumen

Este artículo aborda nuevos enfoques al género de la novela en el siglo XXI. Al inicio sustenta que incluso los críticos contemporáneos más vanguardistas de finales del siglo XX e inicios del XXI, comparan una característica fundamental: un referente en lo que se identificó como “close reading” en el mundo académico angloamericano y “analyse de texte” en francés. Después de numerosas declaraciones en las últimas décadas sobre la muerte de la novela, del autor y de la crítica literaria, resulta evidente que la novela como género ha sobrevivido, los autores siguen siendo tema de estudio y nuevos enfoques son posibles. El estudio del trauma en la ficción (como lo introdujeron Cathy Caruth y David Aberbach), así como la eco-crítica, prometen nuevos puntos de partida. La necesaria “close Reading” requerida por Twitter también abre nuevas posibilidades.

Palabras clave

“Close reading”, eco-crítica, trauma, twitter.

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This paper is a consideration of one of the most basic questions of readers and scholars of the novel in Latin America: in the second decade of the twenty-first century, what could be considered the newest approach or approaches to the novel? (1). There is a basic book, a kind of literature manual, that many of U.S.-based academics have used over the years that addresses this issue for beginning students of literature: *Aproximaciones al estudio de la literatura hispánica*. As much as we academics tend to trivialize introductory books such as this, I would like to suggest from the beginning that simplicity has its virtues and I will return to these *Aproximaciones* later.

For me personally, this matter of new approaches began in the first literature classes that I took at the Universidad de Concepción as an undergraduate, where I heard about the Eastern European scholar Georg Lukács (from young scholars such as Jaime Concha).

Lukács (and Concha) proposed theories of the novel as bourgeois pieces of art. In most of those classes, however, I remember that, one way or another, in real practice of exactly how we read novels and short stories was vague. Thus, somehow or another we discussed novels, but never did we clarify exactly how we were to analyze or approach the novel. Fortunately, the Spanish language and some Chilean editors used to use a wonderful Spanish verb to reveal how to approach a novel: *asediar*. In the late 1960s, the Chilean publishing house Editorial Universitaria published a series called *Asedios*, as in the volume of *Asedios a Vargas Llosa* and *Asedios a García Márquez*, which allowed for a variety of approaches for the approximately twelve to fifteen contributors to such volumes. The studies appearing in these volumes were mostly thematic in nature.

Asediar is a very special verb which does not really refer exactly to either “approaching” or to “*aproximar*”, although it is related to both. Consequently, those *Asedios a García Márquez* were very different ways –new and different *approaches*– as well as *aproximaciones* in the sense that they did not pretend to be definitive, but there was something more pro-active and even aggressive about their attack on Vargas Llosa’s texts, as in “Los romanos asediaron la ciudad hasta conquistarla”, the latter the sample sentence that my Google search produced when I attempted to find the English equivalent of *Asedios*. It produced this sentence and the verb in English “to besiege”; we now have the Romans “besieging” a city and the fifteen Vargas Llosa critics “besieging” *La casa verde* and *Conversación en La Cate-*

dral. This translation is close, but not exactly correct, however, for *Asedios a Vargas Llosa* is functional in Spanish, whereas *Besieging Vargas Llosa* would sound a little too aggressive and even militaristic in English.

With these initial comments on *aproximaciones*, “asedios” and “approaches”, we can return to this manual we use in lower-level literature courses, *Aproximaciones al estudio de la literatura hispánica*, in order to make one basic point before discussing novels such as *Terra Nostra*, twitterliterature, and what happened in-between those two. The basic questions of the “old approaches”, let’s say, of the *Aproximaciones*, as opposed to the new approaches of today, they share one important commonality, some type of close reading.

The term “close reading”, which has its origins in what was the old “New Criticism” and the old French “analyse de texte”, both permanently marked post-WWII readers educated in the 1950s, 1960s and, to a large degree even the 1970s of the now old theory revolution.

Our official historical memory today places the different waves of French theory in the 1960s and 1970s, but in the actual experience of our learning new approaches to the novel, Roland Barthes actually arrived in English translation from across the Atlantic in the early 1980s and in the late 1970s.

Those paradigm shifting books written by Latin Americanists, such as Doris Sommers’ book on nation building, Roberto González Echevarría’s book on the novel as Archive, and Walter Mignolo’s ground-breaking work in Latin American cultural studies, were all products of scholars educated in the 1960s/1970s in the practice of close reading, and both González Echevarría and Mignolo lived a period in their lives of close proximity to analyse de texte in France.

For the reading of the novel, that enormously influential book by Roland Barthes of the 1970’s, *S/Z* was, among other things, an extreme version of analyse de texte and close reading. It was a book of analysis consisting of more pages than the story studied, “Sarrasine”. The same could be said of Paul de Man’s post-structuralist Deconstruction, that was, among other things, a rigorous practice of analyse de texte or “close reading.”

For those of us interested approaches to the novel, the two constants have been some type of close reading, analyse de text and an interest in new approaches to the novel, why do I belabor this

initial point on “close reading”? I do so because, with its association with the old New Criticism, it seems to me that “close reading” has fallen into and unfortunately ill-repute as a kind of formalism that was really just a 1950s orthodoxy called New Criticism and this, in turn, was only one type of close reading, and a very narrow one.

That is, close reading is only one aspect of New Criticism, and it has far outlived New Criticism.

My newly published book (*Mario Vargas Llosa: A Life in Writing*, 2014) implies that, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is still possible to offer close readings and new approaches to the novel, as do all scholars, implicitly, when they write books on novels. Nevertheless, for well over a century, there has been a constant counter discourse to the very idea of any new approaches to the novel, a discourse that repeats itself, year after year, that the novel is *dead*. In 1914, for example, Mexican writer Federico Gamboa declared the death of the novel, and that was only a minor note compared to the numerous other declarations of the death of the novel as a genre, the death of the author (Roland Barthes’ 1950s essay), the death of the 1960s Boom, and, finally, the death of specific writers, such as Vargas Llosa. Of course, the death of the novel would carry with it the death of “new approaches” to the genre.

A parallel narrative to the death of the novel discourse is the narrative relating specifically to the death of the long novel, or the epic novel, or the novel or in Latin America that was called “*La novela total*”, the total novel. In the case of Vargas Llosa, this would be the death of novels such as his two-volume *Conversación en La Catedral*. This 500-page novel was seemingly the high-point of the Boom and the total novel in Latin America when it appeared in 1969. At the time, there was seemingly no known approach to such a seemingly monster of a novel. To a large degree, the *viejos críticos* –the cultural journalists of the time– tended to either ignore or denounce such novels, as they had done for many major modern novels, and as they did with *Pedro Páramo* in the late 1950’s. In that year of *Conversación en La Catedral* and the high-point of the Boom, the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes offered us what was at the time the first new approaches to the new totalizing novel of the 1960s Boom. This new approach came in form of a much-overlooked book titled *La nueva novela hispanoamericana* (1969) in which Fuentes recommended a new critical language for the reading of what was

then the new novel in Latin America –and written with awareness of French theory of the late 1960s.

With Vargas Llosa's *Conversación en La Catedral* and Fuentes critical book *La nueva novela hispanoamericana* the Boom also seemingly had reached their end, and the death notices about the Boom and those long, complex and totalizing novels were as abundant as were the accounts of a new Post-Boom with new criteria for both constructing and reading novels. In synthesis, the Boom was dead, shorter more entertaining novels were in fashion, and, thus, the reading process as explained by Fuentes and Córtazar was seemingly irrelevant.

It seems that each time in the twentieth century that the death knell of the total novel sounds, another of these novels appears, and this is what happened in 1975 when Carlos Fuentes published his massive encyclopedia of modern and postmodern motifs and strategies under the title *Terra Nostra*. Thus, this total narrative survives even though literary critics and novelists do, in fact, pass away. After *Terra Nostra*, of course, the situation still did not change that much, even though a variety of Post-Boom, post-modern, feminist and experimental novelist of the 1980's and 1990's, all claimed the death of the Boom, and the end of totalizing novels.

With the rise of the internet and the new social media in the 1990's and twenty-first century the most popular narrative reads more or less like this: "The new generation and the general populace is accustomed to reading *short* narrative, and long narrative, such as the novel, is dead". By now, of course, this is not a new narrative. However, I would say this recent shift, this short narrative, suggests that we simply will need a new approach to the novel, both as readers and as writers. At the turn of the century, just as even I was starting to believe this new narrative, Roberto Bolaño came forth with *2666* in 2003. This monumental 900-page novel has nothing to do with this new social media narrative and much to do with the writing of novelists such as Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela*, and García Márquez *Cien años de soledad*. Like *Rayuela*, it is an experimental metafiction that makes gestures to numerous writers, including American novelists such as Thomas Pynchon and David Foster Wallace. Like García Márquez, Bolaño re-creates an historical human act of genocide of the proportions of national trauma: the genocide in Juárez. *2666*, announced, yet again, both the survi-

val of the novel and the death of the novel: paraphrasing Adorno, how do you write a novel after Juárez and 2666? These totalizing, broad-sweeping metafictional works such as 2666 seem to invite some kind of new approach.

The given, of course, is the act of close reading, but after that basic fact of close reading that we have already established, what is the new approach that 2666 suggests? Like much fiction of this lengthy and complex totalizing novels, 2666 offer several levels of reading, but two in particular merit emphasis in a consideration of new approaches to the novel, and both are in two relatively new fields of study in the humanities and the social sciences. The first is the study of trauma, which was originally identified by psychologists in the nineteenth century, rejected in the early twentieth century, and ultimately gained validity and importance as Vietnam War veterans showed signs of Post Trauma Stress Disorder. Since the 1970's, our understanding of trauma as human experience, as suffered primarily from the violence of war and sexual violence, has grown significantly, and the work of literary and cultural studies scholars such as Cathy Caruth and David Aberbach has changed our ways of approaching the literature of physical and sexual violence in Latin America and Spain, literatures with a long story, of course, of telling stories about such violence. This is the story of Latin American literature from *Terra Nostra* to 2666, and much Hispanic Literature of the Iberian Peninsula from *El Cantar del Mío Cid* to 2666, and particularly Part IV of this novel are about the traumatic sexual violence and of genocide in Juárez, Mexico. On another level, 2666 invites an approach concerning the human, natural and urban ecology of the text, as understood in the relatively new field called eco-criticism.

An outgrowth of the environmental movement that was launched in 1962 with Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, eco-criticism, like trauma-theory, was developed in the 1970s and 1980s. In the case of eco-criticism, it was officially launched in 1991 when the first eco-critically oriented session took place at the annual convention of the MLA. After that, Lawrence Buell published his foundational book laying the groundwork for ecocritical literary and cultural studies under the title *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), a book that invites us to consider one of the most radically new approaches to literature in a century: it invites us to consider not human

beings but nature as the center. Since 1991 and Buell's landmark book, eco-criticism has blossomed in the discipline of English and has grown significantly in Hispanic Studies in the past ten years. For readers and scholars primarily interested in urban Latin American fiction of the last century (such as myself), the nascent interest in eco-criticism has focused on urban and built environments as a part this eco-criticism that has begun to surpass the sometimes tautological exercise of talking about the environment in environmental literature set in nature, quit often focusing on nineteenth-century Romanticism.

In the final portion of this consideration of new approaches to the Hispanic novel, I would like to briefly suggest some other possible new directions perhaps not quite as developed as trauma theory and ecocriticism. The discussion of race, gender and class that has dominated so much of literary and cultural studies in general, it seems to me, offers a possible dialogue for Hispanists practicing in the U.S. that we could and should exploit more amply as part of not just a specialized academic dialogue on literature but in the national dialogue on race. For example, one of the most important classes that I took as an undergraduate was actually an undergraduate seminar on Afro-American literature from Langston Hughes and James Wright to Eldridge Cleaver's modern classic *Soul on Ice*. To this day, decades later, this undergraduate seminar remains one of the most insightful dialogic experiences I have had concerning race in America and literature. In a time when the CEO of Starbucks has affirmed that this coffee company has a role to play in the national dialogue, I would like to suggest a more comparative approach for Hispanists, one in which we play a more central role in the national dialogue by offering courses in readings on race in the Americas, from Latin American *indigenismo* to US Native American texts, from Manuel Zapata Olivella and Afro-Caribbean to Langston Hughes and Toni Morrison.

In closing, I would like to return briefly to the topic of those long, complex and totalizing novels as a seeming response to rise of the brief narrative on the internet and social media. The phenomenon of the brief narrative or micro-narrative, of course, pre-dates the internet by several decades: in Spanish we have had the micro-narratives of Monterroso since the 1950s, and writers such as Borges have written stunning examples of narrative brevity. In addition

to Hemingway's brief, concise and terse style that Latin American writers such as García Márquez embraced, it was Hemingway who offered this six- word story: "For sale. Baby shoes. Never worn." Robert Frost contributed this: "In three words I can sum up everything I've learned about life: "It goes on." The Swiss writer Robert Walser (1858-1956) was a 1920s pioneer of the micro-narrative— inventing his own written script to write his "Micro-scripts" of a few lines each in less than two square inches of textual space. In Latin America, Borges, that writer who never wrote a novel took it upon himself to be simultaneously totalizing and, above brief. For the writers, the telling of the story of trauma, or of the experience of race, class or gender, or of the story of the environment, has basically two possible approaches either the long total novel of extreme abundance—seemingly an attempt to explore trauma exhaustively, or, at the extreme opposite, as in the case of the Mexican writer Alberto Chimal explore the same topics in the briefest possible form. Chimal has published a book titled *83 novelas* that consists of 83 tweets.

As you have probably already noticed, and here's my personal narrative again, I tend to think *writers* can teach readers and critics as much about their task (new approaches) as can theorists and other critics. Without Fuentes for example, and his book *La nueva novela hispanoamericana*, who knows how long it would have taken to us to learn to talk about the novels of the 1960's Boom?

So my last question, as we move from *Terra Nostra* to Twitter-literature, is just what can we learn about new approaches to the novel from the Tweeting writers and the Tweeting critics? As a recent article in the *New York Times Sunday Book Review* (2/17/15) points out, it is hard to find on twitter any real practice of criticism, anything that resembles the sort of discourse that takes place in an essay or a review. With the Twitter and the new social media, never in history has it been easier than it is today to register one's approval or disapproval of anything, including a novel. But this kind of yes-no judgment is not yet a replacement for criticism. Tweets, in general, are more about information, and literary essays, in general, are more about experience. As Carlos Fuentes pointed out frequently in his later years, never before in history have we had so much access to information yet be so lacking in cultural understanding.

Despite all these limits, I do believe Twitter is arguably an important ally as we seek new approaches to the novel. I personally use

Twitter for a variety of purposes related to my work on the novel and would like to remind you that some of us got our early Twitter training when we wrote our first reviews for the Oklahoma-based journal *World Literature Today*. Former Editor Ivar Ivask would send us via U.S. mail a sheet of Twitter –like instructions requiring us to limit our reviews to 150 words. This was distant from 140 characters, but the same kind of exercise in that it required a different, unusual kind of attention to *word use* and economy of expression. As a former reviewer for *WLT*, as a scholar of the novel, as a passionate reader of a few novels, and as an active user of Twitter, I point out that Twitter and books have three important things in common: a love of words, a precision in using words, and an economy of words. Thus, I see Twitter as an important ally to several new approaches to reading and teaching the novel.

Where Genette’s now old narratology and the new technology meet, by the way, is on Twitter so I soon expect to be hearing references, of course, to Twitterology take *tuiteorología* to your courses on the Hispanic novel. The term Twitterliterature dates back to 2009. My more recent Twitterology has progressed as follows: I adapt Genette’s old concept of the nuclear sentence, a one sentence reduction of the central action of a novel to one sentence to one 140-character sentence. Thus, we began our reading of Homer’s *Odyssey* to “The protagonist returns to Ithaca”. That was my first Tweet of Twitterology (in March 2015; @lalitlector). *Pedro Páramo* was the following Tweet: “The protagonist searches for this father in Comala”.


As an Epilogue, on a personal note, I remember the first time I read with real interest a book of criticism: it was Mario Vargas Llosa’s lengthy study of García Márquez. I recall reading this critical study intensely, non-stop over a week-end as an undergraduate during my senior year with the same unwillingness to stop reading as had been the case of *Cien años de soledad* a few months earlier. What impressed me most about *García Márquez: historia de un deicidio*, besides its impressive thoroughness, was its narrativity, its story line.

That is my last post-script on *New Approaches to the Novel*: may literary and cultural studies follow the lead of those Latin American storytellers who can make a story out of a piece of scholarship. That would be the positive outcome for Twitterology. Why a Twit-

terology? These Tweets are a beginning of a reading, as in Genette, the beginning of a reading to be expanded in essay or book form.

The protocols of a Twitterology can indeed support the point of departure of literary and cultural studies. There are some characteristics of an eco-Twitterology – a few principles:

- 1) The principle of the economy of words.
- 2) An environmentally conscious uses of paper for writing, using as a model journals in the natural sciences that offer a brief synopsis of an academic article printed on real paper, with a link to the lengthy, detailed analysis on the journal's website.
- 3) An environmentally conscious accounting of the carbon footprint for academic conferences and meetings.
- 4) An embracing of narrative as central to this eco-critically new approach to the novel, partially as recognition of the fact that novels are indeed narrative and producing both short and long narratives with a self-conscious use of the economy of words that is environmentally sound, i. e. using the printed word on paper minimally.
- 5) An embracing of the activity of the close reading from the old New Criticism. And as Cortázar proposed with his active reader, the active close reader and asedios are worthwhile corollaries to this point.
- 6) Inserting the novel of Latin America and Spain into the national dialogue on race.

From *Terra Nostra* to Twitterliterature, from 1950 to 2015, this is my story, my narrative of new approaches 

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