

Presented at the Research Seminar
French, Hispanic, and Italian Studies
University of British Columbia
October, 2021

What is Romance Studies? Or, better, what might Romance Studies be? For let us be clear: this is a discipline that at present does not exist; at best it is a meagre administrative fiction, an excrescence of purely bureaucratic reason, of top-down managerial fiat. Our mission, if we choose to accept it, is to invent Romance Studies, from the ground up. Is this possible? Is it desirable? Could we imagine a Romance Studies that would be an intellectual project, something other than the cast-off fag ends of whatever does not fit elsewhere? Might we construct a Romance Studies program whose rationale goes beyond “whatever courses we teach that happen to be in English” and other hollow non-justifications? We have to invent Romance Studies from nothing because, at present, nothing is all we have been given.

We might start with the fact that Romance Studies does not fit well within the university, within the panorama of established disciplines. For the point is not to construct a discipline like others, in their image, but to come up with something different and distinctive. In fact, the incoherence of the project might be more benefit than hindrance, if we could only pin down the forces that ensure that Romance Studies perpetually fails to cohere. Rather than coming up with a Romance Studies that is simply the most recent (and so one of the most insignificant) of partners and competitors in the increasingly scrappy and rapidly shrinking market of Arts degrees and programs, following the well-beaten path outworn by now declining former juggernauts such as History or English, French or Spanish, what about a Romance Studies that leads the way, that offers a vision of a different future... a future of any kind at all?

Jon Beasley-Murray
University of British Columbia
jon.beasley-murray@ubc.ca

Inventing Romance Studies

In this course, we will be reading literary texts, mostly novels, originally written in French, Spanish, Portuguese, or Italian during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Some are by authors you may have heard of—Marcel Proust, for instance, or Carlos Fuentes. Others are more obscure, but one thing they have in common is that each of these books, one way or another, has been judged noteworthy or influential. That does not mean you will always enjoy them, but they will be worth reading. Each text provides food for thought and analysis, and so helps us meet this course's first and minimal goal: to engage with a series of interesting and challenging texts, figure out strategies to read them well, and expand our horizons through this exploration of new texts, new readings. If we achieve nothing else, I will be happy, and you should be, too.

1. In Search of the Commons

A second and more ambitious goal is to seek patterns of commonality and difference between our readings. What, if anything, binds these particular texts together? What concerns do they share? Alternatively, what makes each one different and distinct? Can we see tendencies or changes over time or according to the various (historical, geographical, social) contexts in which they were written?

Some commonalities are pre-given in the choice of set texts. And these choices may be either arbitrary or determined. For instance, the fact that they are all novels—prose fiction—is an arbitrary choice that I have made so that we can compare them better. We could be reading poetry or drama; I have simply decided that it is more coherent to stick to one genre. These texts are also all more or less self-consciously literary; we are not reading journalism, or historical or sociological analysis. This is a more difficult but less arbitrary decision, and we will have much more to discuss about the status and role of literature as we get down to reading, but for the moment I will say that picking literary texts highlights issues of language and representation. Literature (let this be a preliminary

definition) is a form of writing that forces us to pay particular attention to how language works and the mechanisms of representation.

Some of the differences between the texts are also pre-given in our initial selection. I have sought a rough balance in terms of gender, geography, period, and language: we are reading books written by both men and women, from both the “old” world (Europe) and the “new” (the Americas), from every decade in the twentieth century (plus two in the twenty-first), and in all the major Romance languages. We may ask if these are significant differences (whether there is a real distinction between women’s writing and writing by men, for instance, or between literature in French and literature in Spanish) as we go along. Our selection could have been more diverse—there is nothing from Africa or Asia, for example; I have not particularly attended to questions of sexuality, and race is perhaps but a minor theme—but it is a pretty good mix.

I want to focus on the most significant principle of selection, the one that both enables and constrains everything else. All these texts are presented under the rubric of “Romance Studies.” This is, most obviously, a linguistic distinction: though we are reading these books in English, none of them were written originally in that language, or in (say) German, Japanese, Swedish, or Quechua; each was first written in a language that derives from Latin, the official language of the Roman Empire (hence, “Romance”) and later the ecclesiastical and intellectual lingua franca in much of pre-modern Europe. The question is whether this distinction is arbitrary or significant. Do these texts have anything in common simply thanks to the fact that they share, to a greater or lesser extent, some common linguistic heritage? Are they different in any coherent way from texts written in other languages? What, in short, if anything, is distinctive and different about “Romance Studies”? Responding to this difficult question is the third and most fundamental of this course’s goals. We may well fail to achieve it, which is fine, but this is the challenge we are set.

2. No Such Thing as a Romance World

Here is an easy question. Most of the questions that I will be asking in this course have no right answer (though you may always come up with some wrong ones). Not this one. Where is the “Romance World”? Pause the video, and write down your thoughts. While you do that, I’ll have a can of Inca Kola, but I’ll be right back.

[Pause]

Where is the Romance World? You might come up with an answer such as “Western Europe,” in homage to the direct influence of the Roman Empire. Or you may suggest something like “Wherever a Romance language is or was once spoken,” a response that might envisage Madagascar or Quebec, Uruguay or Equatorial Guinea, Goa or São Paulo, even perhaps Somalia or the Swiss canton of Ticino, as part of an expanded Romance World. Either way, however, you would be wrong. The only correct answer to this question is: “I don’t know.” There is no Romance World... and that is a good thing, too.

I am not merely noting that the Romance World is a fiction. Every geographical or cultural area, every continent or nation, is a fiction of some sort—in the words of cultural historian Benedict Anderson, entities such as France or Canada, Argentina or the United States, Singapore or Eritrea, and even (say) Latin America or the Levant are all fictions, “imagined communities.” No, the difference is that nobody has bothered imagining a Romance World. It scarcely rises to the level of fiction. You can test this easily enough by going to your nearest travel agent and trying to buy a ticket to the Romance World. They will happily enough sell you passage to Italy, South Asia, or the Caribbean, contested and dubious entities though these all are. But the request for a flight (or ferry or train) to the Romance World would lead only to befuddlement. Moreover, if by strange fortune you happened to run into a time-travelling travel agent, though he or she might arrange for you to be sent to Ancient Greece or the Inca Empire, it is unclear where they could send you in the past in search of this (not even) mythical beast. Some thirteenth-century feudal Crusader state? I doubt it.

But this, precisely, is the glory of Romance Studies, and it is the first characteristic that makes it different and distinct: it is tied to no territory; it is deterritorialized. Indeed, if we look to the travails of traditional literary disciplines—English, for instance, or French or Spanish—it is clear how much they remain hobbled by their lingering ties to territory or, worse, to specific nation states. Nationalism lingers in any discipline that shares its name with a nation. Area Studies (Latin Americanism, for instance, or Asian Studies) are likewise bedevilled by their efforts to speak for, from, and to specific parts of the globe (or in the case of so-called “world literature,” the globe itself), whose cultural or political distinctiveness they seek to shore up yet eternally are forced to question, whose borders they anxiously patrol as they both shrink and expand. Romance Studies has no such

hindrances, and it would be retrograde indeed to try to invent a “Romance World” to impart some fiction of belonging.

Romance Studies belongs nowhere, and it therefore finds a place everywhere. Casting off notions of belonging or homeland enables a democratic freedom of expression and critique. Nobody can speak for Romance Studies or can claim somehow to be closer to its source. Here we are all strangers, and have a stranger’s prerogatives to interrupt, to question, and to begin anew. The only thing worse than attempting to impose a “Romance World” upon the globe would be a misplaced familialism, to speak of “linguistic cousins” or the like. But this is foiled with the realization that the other thing that the Romance languages share is miscegenation, rather than heritage. They are Latin’s unwanted and uncontrolled spawn, the product of counter-Empire, the consequence of imperial decadence and decay.

3. *A Bastard (Anti-)Discipline*

What do Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, as well as Romanian, Catalan, and so on, have in common? They are all offshoots of Latin. But the thing about Romance Studies is that we study everything *but* Latin. In other words, if it is Latin that is to be the project’s point of coherence, then this is an absent center, foreclosed from the outset. It is more productive (and more to the point) to observe that what these languages *really* have in common is that they are *not* Latin: that they are mutants that have diverged from any source, escaped from any orbit, sufficiently to gain their own names and identities. What unites them is this divergence, the way in which each traces an erratic line of flight away from Latin to become something new, something different, something no longer recognizable in the terms of its supposed progenitor. The Romance languages are Latin’s bastard offspring, forged in the encounter with the Barbarian hordes that destroyed Rome and its so-called civilization. It is not tradition that they share, but their betrayal of that tradition. They are not founded on the classics; they are what usurped the classics and illegitimately took their place. Romance Studies emerges when tradition is infiltrated and overthrown by the demotic, by the everyday speech of a nameless multitude.

If Romance Studies has no homeland, no territory to call its own, equally it has no *pater familias*, no father figures other than those it constitutively turns against and betrays. All this is quite different from most disciplines, policed as they are by calls to origins and

founding fathers. Romance Studies, by contrast, starts from nothing, from destitution, but is open to the outside, to the edge of Empire and what lies beyond. Nobody can claim authority here, because this is a mongrel (anti-)discipline that is born at the point that authority is overthrown, filiation denied, and the decision is made instead to construct something new, to become other.

We add a further measure of betrayal by reading everything in translation. It is appropriate that Romance Studies should be a project conducted in a non-Romance language, to ensure yet another displacement or absent center. Translation, with its inevitable perfidy as well as reluctant homage, is a good image for what we are up to: remaking language, taking texts out of context, helping them travel and become new. It is also of a piece with the democratizing tendency of what we are out to invent. Here there are no native speakers, no native informants. Nobody speaks "Romance." But we all effortlessly speak "not-Latin." We have equal standing in this deracinated discourse that belongs to none and to all.

How does all this square with what we will be doing as this course unfolds? On one level, little, and it is quite possible that we never again utter the phrase "Romance Studies." That would again be quite fitting, and in the spirit of what I am outlining as a primal betrayal. The point is not to get hung up on the rubric or the bureaucratic niceties. The project is to read, to think, to come up with new concepts, to open up horizons. This is what we will be doing week by week, rather than worrying too much whether we are following the program with sufficient fidelity. Why follow a program, when we could more creatively be inventing ways to escape it?

On the other hand, these concepts of betrayal and escape, miscegenation and becoming, translation and misunderstanding, error and doubt, are at the core of many of the texts we are studying. These often concern memory and recollection, infidelity and the invention of new forms of community. Whether it is Proust meditating on his narrator's distance from a not-so-idyllic past in a place he calls "Combray," Alberto Moravia's anti-Oedipal non-Bildungsroman, *Agostino*, Joseph Zobel's semi-autobiographical account of the dog days of Empire in Martinique, Clarice Lispector's description of a becoming-animal in a Brazilian servant's quarters, or Carlos Fuentes's tale of an American drawn to death and love in the Mexican Revolution, all these authors and texts pursue an (anti-)tradition of pushing at limits, questioning the past, and fleeing to construct something

new. They make us think differently about issues of representation and power, writing and the real, authority and authorship. In the end, we may not mention “Romance Studies” again, but it may turn out that, despite ourselves, it is what we have been doing all along.

works cited

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised ed. London: Verso, 2016.