

Throwing Stones at Our Own Roof: Approaching Metacritical Concern in
Anglo-American Hispanism

Ya sabe usted qué difícil es escuchar un reproche que le hagan los demás

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Self-interrogation has been an important underlying motor in the redrawing of disciplines, institutions, networks, and practices that is contemporary critical theory. As a result, a vast body of work has emerged in the past decades where the practice of criticism itself has been placed under scrutiny. The results of such forays tend to be highly visual, since they usually disclose the intricacies of scholars' very jobs, and, as a consequence, trigger off particularly heated reactions from among the intellectual community at which they are aimed. The different degrees of gentleness or amiability with which disciplines accommodate self-interrogating critical techniques into their workings can be taken as an indicator of their sturdiness, their deep-seatedness as bases for intellectual collectivities, and the complexes and imagery that colour the group's self-perception.

In this article I will introduce the practice of critical self-interrogation, here referred to as metacriticism, in Anglo-American Hispanism from a variety of tacks. I will set out by offering a definition of the term metacriticism, with a view to establishing a first conceptual approach to a critical practice that has been occasionally exercised in the discipline, but only seldom been the object of focused theorisation. The concept of metacriticism has featured prominently and under many other guises in the fields of

Critical Theory and English Studies, but has been rarely used within Hispanic Studies. A distinction between ‘theory’ and ‘metacriticism’ (elsewhere a somewhat blurry one) will be advanced, as well as the claim that Anglo-American Hispanism has engaged with the latter (infamously not with the former) in a more or less sustained way. In a second part I will examine the two different manifestations of metacritical concern that have struck the discipline in its recent history: first, the debate over the incorporation of theory, which developed mainly in the early eighties and fuelled many a discussion on the perceived precariousness of Hispanic Studies as a discipline; second, the current sense of suspicion directed at the theories that were eventually deployed and at their validity at the time of explicating Hispanic literary and cultural products. Finally, I will make a case for the incorporation of metacritical work into the discipline as a profoundly auspicious move (and one also that is more than tentatively underway). Potential pitfalls and avenues for research will be sketched towards the end.

It will have already become evident that the ideas I set out to develop cannot be addressed fairly and squarely in the space of one article. The present study aims to be a theoretical and historical introduction to a critical practice that seems to have been undertaken only by a few in Anglo-American Hispanism, though with often very sonorous effects. The article’s underlying aim is to shore up the further establishment of metacritical practice within the discipline of Hispanic Studies. The full exploration of what new paths of research this practice could open up, as well as the methodologies that would need to be adopted (different from the methodologies of literary criticism) do not fall within the scope of this article. They belong in a broader, extensive project whose undertaking can only be conceived of at this moment as a long-term, sustained and concerted enterprise.

1. Towards a Definition of Metacriticism

Metacriticism could be defined as the analytical mode entered by the critic when, instead of looking outwardly at the artistic artefact as its object of study, or to other disciplines and theories in search of congenial analytical tools for the interpretation of the artistic artefact, she chooses to look inwards at her own modes of analysis, or outwards at the ways other critics have proceeded in their endeavours to keep the discipline in shape. There is, therefore, a decisive shift in the critic's object of analysis, going from the literary or cultural product to the critical text itself and the discipline that the latter helps to fashion. An evident sense of stratification thus arises which would supersede the concentric-circle image at times conjured up when visualising literary criticism, with the literary work lying at a centre shared by all the subsequent readings of it produced over time (Fahnestock and Secor 1991: 89). The incorporation of a metacritical edge in critical practice brings about the inclusion of a third layer of analysis, often only loosely connected to the literary work proper. This third layer would be understood as a platform from which to observe and analyse critical activity. Its *raison d'être* would be to render the discipline increasingly self-aware.

Following from this brief definition, it could be maintained that metacriticism can manifest itself in at least two modes:

- a- **Introspective metacriticism** happens when the critic chooses to shed light on the underlying complexities of her own critical practice. Critical mechanisms are studied which may include choice, selection, interpretation, and articulation and how these (and numerous others) converge within oneself in the production of a particular kind of knowledge, namely one that is to be

deemed publishable by our peers. Introspective metacriticism has become daily practice for many, particularly after the emergence of reader-response criticism in the early 80s. The feminist maxim ‘the personal is the political’ (adopted by other identity-politic oriented strands of criticism) also palpably affected the tenor of many studies, with the resulting emergence of autobiographical or personal criticism, also referred to as ‘confessional criticism’ and ‘autocritography’ (Aram Veesser 1996: xiv). The vast body of critical work where academics have licensed themselves to admit that ‘they have emotions and entrails and genitals’ (Lang 1996: 44) is no longer a shocking sight in the fields of Critical Theory and English Studies. Within Hispanic Studies, however, this critical mode is still a rarity, although a recent publication by Randolph Pope in the 2003 issue of *Anales de la literatura española contemporánea* can be perceived as a clarion call in this regard. Pope’s article contribution to this new direction will be examined later on in this article.

- b- **Extrospective metacriticism** happens when critics seize upon critical writing as their object of study, usually with a view to unearthing methodological patterns and interpretive trends (be they individual and specific to one particular critic, or collective). This type of metacriticism has been widely practised and is the fulcrum of much work in Critical Studies. It may manifest itself in the form of institutional analysis of a variety of scopes, ranging from extensive historical accounts of the development of academic disciplines (Graff 1987; Kittler 2004), to more pointed approaches to specific practices within the institution (administration, for instance, as was the defended subject of Stanley Fish’s recent article ‘Take this Job and Do it: Administering the

University without an Idea', 2005). The thinking behind these studies is that by feeling the pulse of institutional movements we may reach an understanding of 'the active roles they play in subject-formation, geopolitical relations, and imaginative productivity' (Poovey 2004). Extrospective metacriticism may also take the form of rhetorical analysis of critical argumentation, of which Cary Nelson's article 'Reading Criticism' was a pioneering example (1976). Taking the view that criticism is 'a rather special way of projecting individual experience through the medium of pre-existent texts' (Nelson 1976: 802) as its opening gambit, Nelson proceeded to dissect the rhetoric of a number of selected writings by Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, and J. Hillis Miller. He placed critical strategies such as argument weakening or overstating, underdocumenting, and the use of prefatory disclaimers under the spotlight, and suggests that even a book's table of contents is worth pausing over when trying to elucidate 'the anxieties of criticism' (Nelson 1976: 813). Ever since, a variety of studies have taken this tack and expanded on the methodologies adumbrated by Nelson (Manley 1981; Fahnestock and Secor 1991). Within Hispanic Studies, extrospective criticism has significantly outgrown introspective explorations, although not, as we shall see, to the degree of institutionalisation this type of studies has acquired elsewhere. Barry Jordan's early work on the delineation of British Hispanism is no doubt a prime example of this type of inquiry (1985, 1990). Malcolm K. Read (1991, 1992, 2003) is also widely known for his acerbic polemics on the institution and practices of Hispanism. More recently, Roberta Johnson has opted for a quantitative assessment of such practices and carried out a statistical analysis of a series of interpretative trends detected in gender-oriented strands of

Anglo-American Hispanism (2003). Some of these studies will be granted further consideration later on.

The concept of ‘metacriticism’ has been at the forefront of critical inquiry for more than three decades now, although the term as such seldom features in writing. Cary Nelson, for instance, spoke of it as ‘critical self-discovery’ (Nelson 1976: 803). Claire Moses referred to this type of analysis, which she practised in her article on the reception of French feminism in the Anglo-American context, as the study of ‘academic politics’ (Moses 1998: 260). To the best of my knowledge, the term has only been employed explicitly in Suresh Raval’s book *Metacriticism* (1981), an exceptional and commanding historical account of critical theory (and theories) from Kantian aesthetics to deconstruction, urged by the following argument:

the history of criticism is a changing scene of criticism; it reveals a dialectical process of assimilation and exclusion by which different concepts engage in mutual contest, a contest which is in principle endless and yet involves elements that are amenable to logical scrutiny. Such a scrutiny would reveal the structure of rationality by means of which different critical concepts exhibit and defend the logic of their respective positions, and this structure would show that logic and rhetoric, reason and imagination are deeply intertwined and cannot be conceived as oppositions without simplifying these concepts as well as the discourse in which they are proposed as oppositions.

(Raval 1981: 12)

Although Raval’s study is rarely mentioned, the kernel of his work underlies the wealth of metacritical studies which has given shape to the widening discipline of Critical Studies. Murray Krieger’s *Words about Words about Words: Theory,*

Criticism, and the Literary Text (1988), Geoffrey Hartman's *A Critic's Journey* (1999), and Marjorie Garber's *Academic Instincts* (2001) all display the verve with which metacritical inquiry has developed and thrived, a direction also evinced by the success of such journals as *Critical Inquiry* and *Boundary 2*, where cutting-edge metacritical propositions are given unstinting coverage.

It is important at this point to address the fact that the terms 'theory' and 'metacriticism' have often been used interchangeably. In his editor's column to the 1990 issue of PMLA, entitled 'The Politics of Critical Language', John W. Kronik identifies the emergence of metacritical concern in literary criticism with 'the lush efflorescence of theory' (Kronik 1990: 385) and surveys the emergence of both types of critical engagement as a unified trend, at no time signalling a distinction between the two. The same equation informs many other studies in this vein (Krieger 1988). I believe, however, that a line can be drawn between them. While to venture a definition of 'theory' here would be overly ambitious, perhaps an understanding of metacritical activity as an eminently 'practical' one will help delineate the difference between these two concepts. Metacritical analysis, as has been put forward in this article, is a critical practice that takes critical scholarship as its object of study. Its methodology may be statistical, stylistic, historical, and its goal will often be to elucidate a politics. Granted, a theory underlies this practice, namely the contemporary postmodernist belief that there is always a politics to be located in discourse, and which has brought about profound changes throughout the entire warp and woof of the human sciences. Metacriticism remains, nevertheless, a practical endeavour.

The received perception within Hispanic Studies is that the discipline has generally kept itself above the fray of such critical delvings, and it is certainly the case that

metacritical inquiry has not prospered to the degree of establishing itself visibly as a self-standing critical mode within Hispanism (Resina 1996: 86-87). The reasoning behind this absence is an involved matter and its full elucidation would give grounds to a discrete metacritical project in itself. A few pointers may be insinuated here, however, which would range from the relatively young age of Anglo-American Hispanism in its institutionalised form, to Hispanists' tendency to be rather apologetic about their object of study in the early stages. Hispanic Studies was often presented, in contrast to, for instance, German or French Studies, as drawing their "subject-matter from the unknown and the half-known: peoples and histories and writings and concerns of which a full cognizance has never been taken" (Round 1992-1993: 143). Against the backdrop of this initial lack in self-confidence as a discipline, the emergence of metacritical concern in Anglo-American Hispanism, with its implications of internal turmoil and self-renewal, could only have had a belated appearance.

But what is more often bemoaned is the absence of any 'real theorist' working from within Hispanic Studies. Nicholas Round, for instance, spoke of the lack of any leading figures whose names would resonate outside the ranks of Hispanic criticism. To put it in his words: 'We did not have an Austin or a Wittgenstein, an Edward Thompson or a Christopher Hill. And it shows' (Round 1992-1993: 141).

Round's words raise the important question of to what extent the absence of such authoritative figures within Hispanism has been taken *prima facie* as one of the discipline's weaknesses and has been only seldom counteracted. This is the working assumption of several recent gender-oriented projects (Vollendorf 2001; Johnson 2005). My contention is, moreover, that although the development of theoretical enquiry does not seem to have underlain contemporary Hispanists' projects, a number

of enterprises in the metacritical vein are nevertheless available for scrutiny, even if such endeavours have been perceived as a somewhat unusual critical practice, separated from the predominant tendency towards literary criticism, and often met by peers with gingerly cautiousness. In the following section, I will offer a historical sketch of how metacriticism as a variety of critical concern has been engaged with in Anglo-American Hispanism, particularly since the early eighties.

2. Trends in Metacritical Inquiry across Anglo-American Hispanism

The eighties and early nineties saw an unprecedented critical bustle around the notion of Hispanism as an institution and around the seemingly anachronistic critical practices that were perceived to stymie the discipline's coming of age. The main bone of contention was the reticence exhibited by some Hispanists to incorporate theory into ongoing critical readings, with the notion of 'theory' here functioning as an umbrella term for all the ramifications of politically-minded stances following from the advent of postmodernism. It was probably Barry Jordan who first, or at least most vociferously commented on 'literary Hispanism's lack of receptivity to recent theory' (Jordan 1985: 55) thus signalling the breach between Hispanic Studies and its peer disciplines in this regard. His contention was, moreover, to expose the unsuitability of what he described as an 'essentialised' and 'de-historicised' scholarly practice from the pedagogical point of view, that is, the extent to which, by eluding the incorporation of theory and of a methodologically aware approach to the reading of literary texts, scholars were denying students the tools to explore 'the social, the political, the ideological' conditions in which these had been produced (Jordan 1985: 60). Instead, he said:

texts are invariably treated as artefacts whose authenticity and value are seen to derive from their assumed unity and coherence, features which are to be

demonstrated by means of ‘close reading’. So, in their innocent encounter with the text, students set out to discover or more accurately to confirm what was assumed in the first place: the way in which the various parts of the text, however disconcertingly disparate or disconnected they may appear, finally mesh together in a complex, coherent, ‘organically’ unified whole, which expresses some profound statement(s) of universal value about human affairs.

(Jordan 1985: 61)

The controversy over the incorporation of theory in Hispanic studies stretched into the nineties and acquired some degree of trenchancy in what has been referred to as ‘the Read-Round debate’ (Hart 1992-1993: 418). The catalyst of the polemic was Michael McGaha’s article ‘Whatever Happened to Hispanism?’ (1990), a brief yet ideologically loaded piece where the author reported on the seeming swiftness with which the institution of Hispanism, once compact and unified, was beginning to crumble. In his view, the culprit for this deterioration was the proliferation of identity-based approaches to literature. After predicting that this ‘atomization (...) of the profession’ (McGaha 1990: 229) was to bring about a sense of paralysing fragmentation to the discipline, McGaha concluded that:

When we attack each other, pitting women against men, natives against non-natives, Spaniards against Latin Americans, we are all diminished and further marginalized. If our profession is to survive and prosper in the twenty-first century, we must come to our senses and rebuild the community of American Hispanism, acknowledging that our common bonds are far greater than the differences that divide us. (McGaha 1991: 230)

McGaha's call for a return to a deceitfully harmonious practice of Hispanic criticism caused a spurt of immediate responses from those who had been advocating the incorporation of contemporary theory as the only way to jostle the discipline out of its perceived sluggishness. Malcom K. Read's reply, appearing in the following issue of the *Journal of Hispanic Philology*, was an acerbic tirade against reactionary positions such as the one upheld by McGaha, which, he stated, still stood for a large portion of the discipline's practitioners at the time of his writing. The purpose of Read's article was to expose and deride McGaha's piece as a profoundly pessimistic one, marked by the author's inability to see the energising positivity implicit in every transitional period. But the tone of Read's exposition is also pessimistic in a twofold sense. On the one hand, his identification of McGaha's stance with most quarters of Anglo-American Hispanism strengthens his view that the institution was, still at the time, a 'curiously conservative, intellectually closed community' (Read 1991: 195), loathe to accommodate methodologies and practices that would bring about 'unbearable divisions' (Read 1991: 206). On the other, Read's brief analysis of the foundational writings of British Hispanists such as Allison Peers and Aubrey F. G. Bell as failed critiques of capitalist structures, marred by a poorly dissimulated aloofness towards the subject of their writings (the Spanish people and their vicissitudes), is aimed to prove that British Hispanism has been a conformist and allophobic institution from its inception. His closing lines, moreover, bode dark days ahead for the progressively minded: 'beneath the thin veneer of change, there perdures that ideological program to recontain what would otherwise be unbearable divisions within the community, a program which is, at the same time, a covert rejection of any genuinely alternative social and cultural order.' (Read 1991: 206)

Nicholas Round's riposte to Read was to appear in the *Journal of Hispanic Research* only a year later. The swiftness of his response partly proves, as we will see later on, the particularly animated discussions that metacritical commentary may elicit. Round's objective was to expose the opportunistic selection of sources underlying Read's decontextualised critique and how he took Michael McGaha's piece about the seeming fragmentation of American Hispanism to press charges against its British counterpart. To this end, Round lays bare the critical manoeuvres Read implemented in order to erect an image of the institution as rampantly conservative and impervious to methodological adaptation throughout history. Read's critical turns included the brushing aside of instrumental names in Hispanism's evolution away from what he aimed to portray as 'an all-embracing Parkerian orthodoxy' (Round 1992-1993: 143), the strategic terminological vagueness around the concepts of 'theory' and 'methodology' (139), and even his argument's reliance on misquoted passages (138). Above all, Round's account aimed to neutralise the sense of despondency permeating Read's article through a more nuanced and balanced approach, one that would address historical miscalculations leading to the current sense of disaffection, but also the gestures towards innovation that have urged the discipline towards increasing self-awareness.

In 1993, the journal *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* included a section entitled 'Diálogo crítico' where concerns akin to the ones informing the Read-Round debate were also voiced. Again, the common thread to the three articles included was the extent to which Anglo-American Hispanism was keeping apace with the proliferation of theories of reading being formulated elsewhere. The 'dialogue' included an article by Aníbal González, where he spoke of the incorporation of theory into Latin American studies as a relatively accomplished process (González 1993). González's

high-spirited account is drastically opposed by James Mandrell's address to Peninsular literary studies, a profoundly pessimistic account of how, where the discipline has indeed integrated contemporary theoretical debates into its structures, it has done so in a mechanical way, thus yielding a rather repetitive, sycophantic discourse (Mandrell 1993). This *modus operandi*, he states, does a disservice to both the literary work in hand and the theoretical material brought to the fore, neither of which is significantly enriched or clarified in the process. Above all, Mandrell's piece is illuminating in that it exposes, while making very few concessions to preserving the discipline's reputation or even credibility, what could be described as Hispanism's most berated sin: its initial reluctance to encompass contemporary theory only finally to do so in a subservient fashion, all the while (and this is an important addition) never having generated its own theoretical constructs or contributed to international tides of thought.

For all its polemical thrust, Mandrell's contention was already not representative of the discipline's workings at the time. Its main point, that Hispanists' superficial handling of theory in their critical activity was in many senses meretricious -his identification of literary theory as 'a one night stand' for peninsular Hispanic studies makes for a particularly poignant image in this respect (Mandrell 1993: 302)- was in reality being counteracted by a consistent body of work solidly grounded in theory and sanctioned, above all, by Mark Millington and Paul Julian Smith's coinage 'New Hispanisms' (Millington and Smith 1994). The latter's work has of course been instrumental in the process towards the incorporation of theory into Hispanic critical readings, be it through the incorporation of new analytical tools in traditional areas such as Golden Age or Lorca studies or through the tireless proposition of new objects of study in support of the establishment of a Hispanic Cultural Studies. But a wealth

of ‘new readings’ were already being produced by numerous other critics working in the Anglo-American context, who supported and fuelled such innovative directions. Mandrell’s assertion that such critical bustle was a vapid endeavour doomed to fall by the wayside was a theoretical position to be reckoned with. However, its underlying thrust seemed to originate at the critic’s dismay in the face of the discipline’s lack of any original theorist and therefore it brushes aside all subsequent applications of (extraneous) theories as pure repetitious rhetoric. As John W. Kronik put it in his reply to both González and Mandrell’s articles:

True, not every critic challenges the system, transcends the conventional debate, shatters the canon. More power to the few who do, and the more pity if their surnames are exclusively French or English or German or Russian or Italian and not Hispanic. But would Mandrell silence the voices that have brought Lacan to Pardo Bazán, Iser to Galdós, Bakhtin to Valle-Inclán, Saussure to Guillén, Kristeva to Tusquets, Cixous to Martín Gaité? (...) Are the developments in Quijote criticism, the narratological reinterpretations of the picaresque, the appreciation of Golden Age drama as performance, the feminist revival of María de Zayas, the revision of realism all as negligible as Mandrell purports? (Kronik 1993: 313-314)

It would be imprecise to say that the debate over the incorporation of theory in Anglo-American Hispanism has subsided ever since, although it is certain that the main point of contention has veered away from mainly broad-brush critiques of the institution to more subject-specific explorations of how theory was eventually integrated into critical activity. More specifically, suspicion has been directed towards the theories that were implemented and their real validity at the time of exploring Hispanic literatures and cultures.

The 2003 issue of *Anales de la literatura española contemporánea* can be taken as an indicator of this emerging concern. In a sequence of three articles penned by critics Roberta Johnson, Randolph Pope, and Leora Lev, the distinct ways in which Hispanists incorporated mainly French and North-American theory into their readings are explored, as well as the question of whether Hispanism has exhausted its engagement with theory and entered the much-vaunted era of post-theory. From the point of view of the metacritical analyses in which they engage, both Johnson and Pope's articles are highly innovative. The former represents the first metacritical exploration coming from Hispanism to adopt a methodology based on quantitative assessment. With a view to sizing up the 'trends in recent feminist scholarship of twentieth-century Peninsular literature' (Johnson 2003: 11), the author examined a substantial body of publications, both periodicals and book-length volumes, with an eye for those with an avowed women-oriented focus. As emerged, almost 90% of the articles perused resorted to French and American theorists when approaching Peninsular literature. Such a stark figure dampens the working positions of those who, like Leora Lev writing in the same issue, still promulgate 'the repulsion between Theory and Spanish Studies' (Lev 2003: 32), and opens up new paths of interrogation. Roberta Johnson's contention that 'Spanish feminist criticism has become a de facto colony of Anglo-American feminist criticism' (Johnson 2003: 13) or her suggestion that Hispanist critics' continuous recourse to non-Hispanic influential theorists and philosophers is in fact a manoeuvre for self-validation, are only two of the many challenging considerations that sustained metacritical analysis would bring to the fore. Randolph Pope's contribution to the discussion may be indicative of a new shift in Hispanic metacritical studies, namely one from the extrospective to the introspective mode of analysis. His account of how Anglo-American Hispanic Studies have fallen

into the trap of ‘producing cutting-edge criticism by the recipe’ (Bieder 2003: 7), is exceptional for its self-critical value. Keenly aware of the power differentials at work when critics adhere to certain theorists while ignoring others, Pope turns to explicate his own critical instincts and the seeming ease with which scholars like himself may apply theory in a mechanical or perfunctory fashion. As he puts it when reminiscing on his own reading of Javier Marías’ *Corazón tan blanco*:

My first tendency was to connect the use of these mirror images to Baudrillard, the repetition to Nietzsche, as well as to connect the duplicity itself, grounded in a crime committed in Cuba, to postcolonial criticism. Just mix, add some sugar, bake, and it is done. (Pope 2003: 25)

Confessional passages such as Pope’s above are infrequent in Hispanic Studies. Its self-deprecating tenor may be still received with suspicion or guarded respect by peers, who could see in such exercises of disclosure a real disservice to the discipline. In other words, introspective accounts in this vein could be considered more harmful than edifying when articulated in a scholarly forum that has for long toiled to acquire institutional standing. Further, Pope’s article’s mixing of creative literature, personal journal, and academic criticism may be perceived as a purely belletristic exercise with little value for the discipline’s progress. It is my contention, however, that critical writings in this mode are not worthless or plain exhibitionistic, but highly valuable for the inward-looking interrogation they effect and the disciplinary maturity of which they are a harbinger. The particular kind of insights that introspective metacriticism brings about are therefore far from debilitating, but an indicator of an individual’s belief in the discipline’s collective balance and, probably also, as was suggested in the introduction to this article, the fastest way of effecting change.

3. Towards a Practice of Metacriticism in Hispanism: Pitfalls, Benefits and Avenues

There are inklings in the literature that this warts-and-all approach to criticism has not gone down well in Anglo-American Hispanism. As was previously mentioned, the rather lively spurt of replies that metacritical commentaries such as McGaha brought about in the early nineties could be taken as an indicator that this type of work rarely goes unheeded, and can be severely rebuked on occasions. Pierre Bourdieu has addressed this type of reaction in his sociological analysis of the university field: *Homo Academicus* (1988):

It is well-known that no groups love an ‘informer’, especially perhaps when the transgressor or traitor can claim to share in their own highest values. The same people who would not hesitate to acclaim the work of objectification as ‘courageous’ or ‘lucid’ if it is applied to alien, hostile groups will be likely to question the credentials of the special lucidity claimed by anyone who seeks to analyse his own group. (Bourdieu 1988: 5)

In his view, a sociological approach to the “world in which we are involved” (i.e. academia) can only be successfully carried out “in dramatized form, as it were” (Bourdieu 1988: 1). This would, in principle, pre-empt a particular type of critical reflex usually elicited by metacritical commentary, and one that can be studied in the light of Habermas’ concept of ‘performative contradiction’ (Habermas 1987: 238-265; 1990: 88-89), that is, the discursive paradox ensconced in certain critical statements to rely for their validity on the very maxims they deny, or in a more commonplace tone, a kind of ‘look-who’s-talking-effect’. This type of response was traceable in Nicholas Round’s reply to Read’s article (1992-1993), when he criticised

the latter for failing to notice in his own work the same lack of socially subversive worth he identified and spurned in Paul Julian Smith's. To put it in Round's words:

He [Read] expresses, for example, a deep regard for Paul Julian Smith's virtuoso theorizing [...]. But this does not keep him from delivering the question that matters most: given that the deconstructive approach to literature offers itself as a 'radical subversive discourse' [...], what does it actually do for any form of social liberation? Nor is he inhibited from giving the correct answer: not a lot. *What is missing is a parallel candour about the effectiveness of his own activity in posing and answering such a question* [...]. (Round 1992-1993: 134, my own emphasis)

Identical suspicions can be detected in two reviews of Read's books *Language, Text, Subject. A Critique of Hispanism* (1992) and *Educating the Educators: Hispanism and Its Institutions* (2003). On the former, Noël Valis protests that Round's book is 'too unquestioning of its own premises' (Valis 1994: 268). John Kronik's also comments on a similar perception regarding Read's most recent book, as he discloses the same ideological leanings implicit in the author's critique of 'the political and ideological presuppositions of Hispanism' (Kronik 2005: 105). In general, this reaction could be regarded almost as a reflex counter-attack likely to be deployed whenever a more or less blunt diatribe is articulated against a given faction of the interpretive community (or, indeed, against the community as a whole). Because the scholar engaging in metacriticism sets out to address and break down the social, cultural, historical, institutional, and even personal conditions for the production of critical knowledge, a task for which, as Valis rightly notes, 'painful archival research and wide-ranging study' is required (Valis 1994: 268), it is predictable that in so

doing she will be arousing her peers' suspicions as to her awareness of her own unavoidable situatedness. Critical exchanges may ensue of a particular heatedness leading to instances of what has been elsewhere categorised as 'academic violence' (Fox-Genovese 1996: 68), a metacritical concept itself. Metacritical considerations are instrumental in disclosing (and exposing) those essential constituents of critical activity (from trends in the adoption of certain methodological tools to personal choices or preferences) and that such a subject matter will inevitably both 'embarrass and attract' an academic community secretly eager to read about itself (Pecora 1996: 76).

Beyond the possibility of critics engaging in tetchy repartees, the incorporation of metacritical analysis into scholarly activity can be perceived to pose other unwelcome challenges to the discipline. Among these, there is the fear that by probing into our peers' (and our own) critical operations, the discipline will end up disintegrating into paranoid activity, quashed by a particular type of hypercorrectness: one stipulated by an increasing collective awareness of our own instinctive and acquired predilections, our own stylistic twitches or mannerisms, the inevitable yet 'scrutinizeable' contingency of our work. This somewhat apocalyptic charge has been frequently articulated by critical theorists. Murray Krieger put it thus:

How can the literary scholar-critic carry on what are still necessary activities when these rest upon assumptions that have been stripped away by the theoretical activity licensed by a new critical awareness? How can our daily works as readers and teachers of texts vibrate to any such succession of critical undoings? How many habitual but indispensable assumptions do we still proceed upon, assumptions that we should acknowledge, even though we have

delegitimated them, or even have theorized them away altogether? (Krieger 1988: 98)

Far from having stymied the emergence and diversification of metacritical work, however, this form of anxiety appears to have dwindled in the face of a changing disposition towards the political and institutional quality of critical work, a tacitly agreed 'sympathy for ideological analysis' (Linderberg 1990: 406) that has endowed critics with the methodological and intellectual tools to exercise, identify, and unabashedly acknowledge the leverage of politics on their work.

Against the queasiness that metacritical practice may arouse within and across disciplines, I would like to propose two concrete cases in which this type of study can be said to have yielded tangible paradigmatic changes in the field of Hispanic Studies. The first one involves the gradual shift from unifying approaches to a singular 'Spanish literature' to the current diversifying study of a plural enclave of 'Iberian or Peninsular literatures'. Granted, this change is to be understood as the result of collective work towards the integration of Postcolonial theories, with their emphasis on the notions of cultural localisation, nationalism, and minority cultural identities. But it is no less the outcome of metacritical studies such as Alberto Moreiras' 'Neohispanismo y política de la cultura' (1992-1993) and Joan Ramon Resina's 'Hispanism and its Discontents' (1996), where a series of theoretical pointers regarding the construction of a non-hegemonic approach to Peninsular literatures and cultures in and from the academy are placed into perspective. A more recent move is also occurring in the gender-oriented strands of Anglo-American Hispanism, articulated in the main by Roberta Johnson. Following from her 2003 metacritical study of the observable tendencies and patterns in Anglo-American feminist critics' work, whereby French and Anglo-American feminist theorists are given unambiguous

precedence in the interpretation of Hispanic literatures, Johnson has subsequently published an article where the case is strongly made for an issues-based (as opposed to a chronological) description of ‘Spanish feminist theory’ in its own social, historical and political terms. Foreseeably, other critics in the field will follow suit in trying to counteract this perceived ‘colonialismo académico’ (Barrau 2003) in gender-oriented Hispanism.

On the whole, and against Todorov’s claim that metacritical inquiry is a sign of the futility of our times (Todorov 1991: 9), I am here proposing a rather more sanguine view of the practice of self-critique (in all its potential manifestations) within Hispanic academic discourse, in the belief that this would prove (is, in fact, already proving) an important and exciting path of inquiry, as well as an indicator of the discipline’s maturity. Understood as a critical practice towards increasing self-consciousness, metacriticism would also serve to strengthen the discipline as it ramifies, at a time when major shifts are afoot: the expansion of Hispanic cultural studies’ objects of analysis, be it Chris Perriam’s work on masculinities in Spanish cinema (Perriam 2001, 2003) or Paul Julian Smith’s interest in Spanish TV series (Smith 2002; 2004), and the burgeoning of studies with a translational slant (Buffery 2002; Linn 2003) are but a few examples of these ongoing innovations. Above all, it is important to emphasise that the underlying aim of fostering sustained metacritical practice would be neither to ‘purify by prescription’ (Hartman 1999: 13), nor to preempt what could end up turning into a fixed typology of critical wrongdoings, but to increase discipline self-awareness and to expand on the range of potential objects of study available for scrutiny. It is with this notion in mind that I would like to offer, by way of conclusion, a series of avenues for future investigation.

- 1) Statistical analyses of the kind tentatively undertaken by Roberta Johnson in her 2003 study would prove advantageous tools for the study of the acts of evaluation implicit in the academic-related activities of ‘publishing, printing, purchasing, and preserving’ (Herrnstein Smith 1988: 3). Granted, this type of research can only be conceived of as a compartmentalised type of critical enterprise, where certain perceived patterns, taken as discrete units of study, can be selected and substantiated through empirical analysis. A relevant critical element worthy of metacritical inquiry could be, for example, what have been described as ‘culturally reproduced’ works, that is, ‘a text or verbal artifact, more frequently read or recited, copied or reprinted, translated, imitated, cited, commented upon, and so forth’ (Herrnstein Smith 1988: 48). The ideological and institutional motivations underlying such forms of cultural and intellectual repetition (manifest, for instance, in the selective operations implicit in anthological or encyclopaedic works) could become clearer after a quantitative (not only qualitative) exploration of their occurrence.
- 2) As hinted by some of the bibliographic references in this article, the work of post-axiological theorists such as Barbara Herrnstein Smith or Pierre Bourdieu could prove instrumental in the fleshing out of a metacritical exploration of (scholarly, literary, critical) value in Hispanism. I put forward these names in full recognition that the incorporation of ‘exogenous’ critics’ work to the study of Hispanic literatures and cultures is currently being interrogated. I endorse, however, a Hispanic critical practice keenly attentive both to endogenous and exogenous voices, in the belief that this engrained dichotomy is to be gradually diffused along with what has been elsewhere described as the ‘doxa of national language departments’ (Apter 2003: 254). New theories of

Comparative Literature support this shift (Spivak 2003; Pratt 2004). Also, those theories of criticism formulated by ‘left conservatism’ (Kimball 1990), mainly concerned with how the mushrooming of postmodernist theory in the last decades, seen as elitist and obscurantist, has done a disservice to ‘real’ leftist critics, could also prove convenient as a backbone to the much-quoted rashness with which Hispanic studies critics seem to have cared only about how ‘elegantly’ does the literary work ‘validate the theory being applied’ (Allen 1999: 73).

- 3) Perhaps more work could be done, unabashedly, on Hispanic critics themselves and by themselves. In other words, metacriticism in the introspective mode could begin to be cultivated as an ideal means of providing evidence of the practices, agendas, and views originating in the critic’s personal space. Gerald Graff’s ‘Self-Interview’ (1996) can be taken as the epitome of this kind of critical procedure, which is particularly advanced in the field of English Studies. Within Hispanism, the practice of introspective metacriticism, so far tentative and occasionally berated (Schwartz 2002: 12), would serve a further purpose, namely an ontological one. To articulate a self requires a prior sense of presence, of having a ‘relevant self’ to display and talk about (Simpson 1996: 85). It is not surprising that Hispanic critics have been visibly reluctant to engage in this kind of analysis, as that sense of discipline autonomy (let alone of individual authoritativeness beyond the discipline’s circuits) has been perceived as a hard-earned asset (Resina 1996: 85).
- 4) One last path for metacritical research in Hispanism could be the exploration (and interrogation) of those critical phenomena that are usually described as

specific of the discipline. I am particularly referring to two occurrences which are often cited in passing yet only rarely investigated: the so-called gap between Peninsular and Anglo-American Hispanic criticism and the problematical rapport between Spanish women authors and Anglo-American gender-oriented scholars around the label 'feminist'. Of the former, I have only been able to locate one metacritical approximation, namely José M. del Pino and Francisco La Rubia Prado's introduction to their volume *El hispanismo en los Estados Unidos: Discursos críticos/Prácticas textuales* (1999). There, a series of explanations are provided that would warrant further research: the seeming reluctance within peninsular academia to stretch their working methodologies beyond the 'métodos filológicos de raíz positivista' (del Pino & La Rubia Prado: 9), and the different recruiting policies between the Spanish context, still riddled by a rampant nepotism, and the Anglo-American one, where 'rara vez contratan a sus propios doctorandos' (del Pino & La Rubia Prado: 10). A combination of these two factors, amongst others, would perhaps explain why books offering dutiful structuralist approaches of the literary work (with Gérard Genette's work as their theoretical backbone and a linear focus on discrete objects of study such as 'cronotopes', 'prolepsis', and 'analepsis') still find currency within the peninsular milieu but would almost certainly never see the light of day in the present Anglo-American publishing context. As far as the tension between Peninsular women-authors and Anglo-American feminist-identified critics is concerned, more metacritical work addressing issues of critical authority or the tacit power differentials implied in this debate is on order. Specifically, a study of the persistent frequency with which some peninsular authors' reticence to be

identified with feminism is seen by some Anglo-American critics as a 'typically Spanish' instance of the culture's conservatism would prove revealing and engaging.

In this essay I have offered a brief theoretical and historical grounding for the variety of forms of metacritical inquiry produced within and on the discipline of Hispanic Studies in the recent decades. I have also offered some suggestions about the ways in which further work along these vectors can prove beneficial and constructive for the discipline. Steep though these paths of inquiry may prove, more research on our critical practices and on the institutional structures that accommodate, foster or shun these practices, would come to confirm the salutary new phase in which the field of Hispanic Studies, a decidedly expanding one, has entered.

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