
In Memoriam
Mario J. Valdés, RSC (1934-2020)



Mario Valdés (1934-2020) Photo: Colin Faulkner.

Unamuno specialist, Ricoeur commentator, hermeneutic theorist, comparative literary historian: these were only a few of the scholarly hats Mario Valdés wore over his long and illustrious career at the University of Toronto from 1963 onward. After graduating from the University of Illinois with a doctorate in Philosophy and Spanish, he was hired as an Assistant Professor of Spanish at the University of Toronto, and when Northrop Frye founded the Programme in Comparative Literature in 1969, he quickly

became one of the first faculty on board. Though he left for the University of Illinois at Chicago for a few years (1976-78) to serve as head of the Department of Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese, he returned to Toronto to found and become the first director of the Centre for Comparative Literature in 1978.

Under his leadership, the Centre became internationally known as the hub of literary theory in Canada. Mario brought to Toronto (to teach or lecture) many of the major theorists of the time: Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Robert Jauss, Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, Wolfgang Iser, Frederic Jameson, Tzvetan Todorov, Gérard Genette, and the list could go on and on. International conferences organized by Mario morphed into books he edited with his colleague O. J. Miller (*Interpretation of Narrative*, 1978; *Identity of the Literary Text*, 1985), and the new Centre was placed firmly on the map. When the students and faculty rallied to fight the threatened closing of the Centre by the university administration in 2010, many of these important theorists and critics wrote powerfully in defense and support of its important role internationally.

Mario's leadership roles in the profession took many forms besides the local and administrative: he was President of the Canadian Comparative Literature Association (1981-3); President of the coordinating committee of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) for the publication of the *Histoire comparée des littératures de langues européennes*; founding editor of this journal, *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* (1976-92). He sat on the editorial boards of many other scholarly journals, including the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, *Cuadernos de Comunicación*, *International Fiction Review*, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, *Purdue Studies in Romance Languages*, *Comparatistica*, *Compar(a)ison*, *Teoría y Crítica de la Cultura y Literatura*, *Target*, *La Torre*, among others, as well as serving on the editorial board of numerous publishers (John Benjamins, University of Toronto Press). He was the second Canadian, after Northrop Frye, to be elected President of the Modern Language Association of America (in 1991) and served valiantly during the difficult "culture wars" of his tenure. Over the years, Mario taught as a visiting professor in many universities, among them Odense University (Denmark), Santiago de Compostela (Spain), New York University, Columbia, Brigham Young, Cornell, Tulane, Cincinnati, El Colegio de México, and the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. He lectured, quite literally, around the world, in great demand as a keynote speaker for conferences and as a guest lecturer.

A prolific and dedicated scholar, Mario made his intellectual mark on a number of important fields of study in both Spanish and Comparative Literature. He began his career studying the work of the Spanish writer and philosopher, Miguel de Unamuno. Not only did he publish his study *Death in the Literature of Unamuno* (1964; 1966) but also, later, *An*

Unamuno Source Book (1973), this with his wife, María Elena Diaz Barriga de Valdés. Together the two of them were personally responsible for saving and disseminating many of Unamuno's personal papers. In the 1960s, some 35 years after the author's death, the two intrepid scholars convinced the makers of an early version of a photocopier to allow them to take a prototype machine to Spain, during the Franco years, to copy (in secret, but with the family's permission and assistance), the letters and newspaper articles in Unamuno's library. Access to the papers had been forbidden, so the two had to smuggle material out of the library, photocopy them in their miniscule apartment, and then mail the copies to Canada – all under the ever-watchful eye of the Fascist authorities. By the time they finished, they were able to donate to the Fisher Rare Books Library at the University of Toronto, 36 boxes of papers (38,000 pages), all carefully indexed and inventoried by the valiant photocopiers themselves. Though the originals are now in the National Archives of Spain, their content was first made available to scholars through the work of Team Valdés. Singly or together they also produced a critical edition Unamuno's *Niebla* (1969; 1982) and both a Spanish edition (1979) and an English translation of his *San Manuel Bueno, mártir* (1974; 1979; 1996).

The direction of Mario's research for the few next decades moved toward hermeneutics and phenomenological theory and resulted in a series of invaluable studies in that area: *Shadows in the Cave: A Phenomenological Approach to Literary Criticism Based on Hispanic Texts* (1982); *Phenomenological Hermeneutics and the Study of Literature* (1987); *Worldmaking: The Literary Truth-Claim and Interpretation of Texts* (1992); *La interpretación abierta* (1996); *Hermeneutics of Poetic Sense: Studies on Cinema, Literature and Cultural History* (1998). His long and fruitful collaboration with French philosopher Paul Ricoeur led to their co-authored *Indagaciones hermenéuticas* (2000) and to Mario's editing of *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination* (1991) and *Con Paul Ricoeur: Indagaciones hermenéuticas* (2000).

In part, perhaps, because of the Mexican background of his wife, María Elena de Valdés, and in part because of his own scholarly and, increasingly, teaching interests, Mario also worked in the field of Latin American studies, editing or co-editing such volumes as *Inter-American Literary Relations* (1985); *Approaches to Teaching García Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1990); *Leyendo a Paz* (1992), *Latin America as Its Literature* (1995); *O Condor Voa: Literatura e Cultura Latino-Americanas* (2000). He was named the Northern Telecom Professor of Iberoamerican Studies at the University of Toronto (1995-99), and was elected a Member of the Mexican National Academy of the Language. In 2006 was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal Ohtli by the Mexican government.

In the early 1990s, however, Mario began one of the most ambitious and large-scale of his scholarly projects: nothing less than a collaborative

interdisciplinary rethinking of literary history. Working with various national and international Comparative Literature associations over the years, he had continued to be active in organizing conferences and editing volumes in the comparative literature field (*Toward a Theory of Comparative Literature*, 1990; *Comparative Literary History as Discourse*, 1992). It was the ICLA that would sponsor the new series of multi-authored volumes that would aim to radically re-conceptualize literary history in comparative terms. Opening up (and opening out) the notions of both “literary” and “history” in the light of the rethinking of both in the decades preceding, these collaborative endeavours sought to conceive anew the very categories of selection and ordering used in the writing of literary history. No longer to be organized around movements, linguistically-limited geographic areas or cultural-historical periods, they would reevaluate traditional historical premises and methodological frames of reference in order to focus on large, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual regions – Latin America and Eastern/Central Europe – with complex historical, cultural, social, religious, and linguistic realities. He applied to the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding, and in 1995, he and Linda Hutcheon were awarded one of their first Major Collaborative Research Initiative Grants for \$1 million – a gigantic amount of money for the Humanities at that time. Over the next decade 7 comparative volumes would appear, 3 of the *Literary Cultures of Latin America: A Comparative History*, edited by Mario and Djelal Kadir, and published by Oxford University Press, and the 4 volumes of *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*, edited by John Neubauer and others. In addition, Mario co-edited a theoretical study deriving from this collaborative experience entitled *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory* (2002).

(I have mentioned María Elena de Valdés a number of times, and that is no accident, for she was Mario’s partner in all things, always by his side to support, encourage and assist. Along with her own fine scholarly work on Mexican women writers, Gabriel García Márquez, and Unamuno, she was a major player in the comparative literary history project, both organizationally and intellectually.)

Mario was one of the last of a generation of academics in Canada who had to retire at the age of 65, so – officially – Mario retired from the University of Toronto in 1999. But his institutional and intellectual presence was felt over the next decades nonetheless, especially when the Centre for Comparative Literature (of which he was the founding director) was threatened with closure. Over the course of his academic career, Mario supervised over 30 doctoral dissertations in both Spanish and Comparative Literature, and sat on many more graduate committees. He remained a caring and supportive mentor for all the students with whom he worked, well into his retirement. Canada and the international academic

community have lost, in Mario, one of its most energetic, hard-working, and committed scholars and teachers. It was my honour to work with him – and I stress “work” because Mario always worked so very hard, and therefore we all did! Happily, his books and his students live on to testify to his lasting influence.

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