

Ethics and Aesthetics: A Conversation with Ilan Stavans

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When one Googles Ilan Stavans, one comes across numerous interviews with him, and conversations which prove that Stavans is a luxury as partner in conversation: incisive, lively, straight forward, eloquent, comprehensive, lucid and always crystal clear in his replies. He never beats around the bush.

Actually, since the late 1990s, Stavans has devoted his energy to reinvigorating the literary genre of the conversation not as a promotional tool but as an insightful instrument to meditate on the world in general, and to explore his own intellectual and creative world. Moreover, Neal Sokol interviewed Stavans in a book-long volume, *Eight Conversations* (2004), on his Jewish and Latino heritage; translator Verónica Albin discussed the way the word “love” has changed through the age in the book *Love and Language* (2007) as well as on topics like libraries and censorship in *Knowledge and Censorship* (2008), and Canadian journalist Mordecai Drache probes him on the Bible as a work of literature in *With All Thine Heart* (2010).

This dialogue took place, as the concluding event, on Friday, April 25, 2014, during the program “Spaces of Dialogue: International Conference in Transatlantic Literature,” organized by Spain’s Real Colegio Complutense at Harvard, in Cambridge (MA) (<http://rcc.harvard.edu/wp/>).

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Isabel Durán: Let us begin with the genre we are practising right now. You have published a number of books where you converse with someone.

Ilan Stavans: I love the format. It enables my mind to travel in unforeseen directions. There is no bigger pleasure in life than the pleasure of friendship. And what is friendship if not dialogue?

ID: Is the interview a genre in itself? I mean, there is a tendency to revile the interview as something that only has a place in the mass media.

IS: Borges used to say that we owe the building of our civilization to a handful of Greek *conversateurs*. He was surely referring to Socrates' inner circle.

ID: Yet we don't seem to realize that we live in a privileged time when writers can give interviews, can talk about their own work, may add nuances and opinions to enrich our understanding of their work. Why can't a critical interview with an author be considered a sort of self-review, self-analysis, a fragment of a literary autobiography, or a form of personal criticism? I ask this question because I consider an interview as valid a tool for readers, teachers, students or critics as may be critical biographies, letters, diaries, critical essays, or reviews. I say this with full conviction: I'm a frequent reader and user of interviews.

IS: I spend *most* of my days in dialogue: with students, with colleagues, with friends. Or I should say: I spend *the best* of my days in dialogue. Engaging someone in a sustained dialogue is an extraordinary opportunity to explore a theme from multiple angles. Obviously, what attracts me to this endeavour is its exegetical quality. There's something Talmudic in studying nonstop, allowing one's free-association to lead us spontaneously –that is, mysteriously– into the realm of the unknown. In my view, all fiction is autobiographical and all autobiography is fiction. What I mean is that all conversations are self-reflexive. They are about who we are in that particular space and time. Years later, we realized the person in that dialogue is no longer who we are. But who are we? Quevedo's unparalleled verse comes to mind: "*presentes sucesiones de difunto*," a sequence of selves frozen in time.

ID: Your new, just published book, *El ojo en la nuca* (2014), is again an expanded dialogue with your compatriot Juan Villoro. Why him? And what does it mean to

have “an eye on the nape”: to look at things with different eyes, to see beyond what is real, to transcend the limits imposed by our senses?

IS: Villoro is a wonderful partner: bright, informed, intelligent, and well-travelled. We have only met in person on a couple of occasions. Yet personal interaction doesn't mean one cannot have a deep, proving encounter. *El ojo en la nuca*, as I state at the beginning of our conversation, is the capacity to see beyond the surface, to question one's surrounding from multiple perspectives. It's an expression I adore.

ID: What does one see with the eye on your nape, as your title suggests?

IS: Early on in my conversation with Villoro, the suggestion is made that intellectuals have another eye –“*un ojo en la nuca*”– that enables them to see forwards and backwards, that is, inside out and outside in. This is another way of saying they have an acumen, an acuteness that gives room to a fuller picture of things. To be honest –and I mention this to him, I'm not sure the image is altogether appropriate. I, for one, don't believe artists and intellectuals are exceptional. That's a perception inherited from the Romantics. In the 21st century, the view is less Emersonian: no muses, no enlightened spirits. We are just like everyone else, except a little bit more.

ID: What do you mean?

IS: I mean that artists and intellectuals might be more sensitive. Or perhaps they are simply willing to let their imagination flow, to articulate their ideas in public, to serve –in Hamlet's famous line– as “a mirror to nature.”

ID: Place and space seem to be very much linked to one's identity. My Castilian grandmother used to say “*se es de donde se echan los primeros pises*,” her own way of saying one belongs to the place where one was born. However, a different view is to believe that we carry one's own identity not in a place, but in our story. If you look at your existential itinerary, how do you feel, as a man, and as an author, regarding place and identity? Are you more Hispanic than American? Are you more Jewish than secular? Is Mexico your “*patria*,” which, funny enough, is Mother Land in English, *matria*?

IS: I carry my portable home with me through storytelling [...]. That home, in truth, is several homes, depending on the language.

The multilingual writer has different loyalties. I love Spanish as much as I love English, Hebrew, Yiddish, Spanglish, French, Portuguese [...]. Why should there be an obligation to choose? It is like having several lovers, each of which offers other qualities. Or various friends. Or, in the argument I was making before, like having many homes. Or many homelands.

A writer's true country is language, not place. And one might have many countries. I certainly do. Am I a traitor because I refuse to choose one? I couldn't care less.

By the way, I am also struck by the different ways one refers to country: Mother Land as well as Father Land. And what is the difference between patriotism and nationalism? What are we supposed to do with the love we have for country: die for it? I, for one, wouldn't, no matter what that country is: Mexico, the United States, and Israel. Likewise, I'm puzzled by the way we refer to language: if the first one is the mother tongue, what is the second one: the mistress tongue?

ID: On to bilingualism, Ilan. I agree with George Steiner in thinking that Babel, the alleged biblical curse, was actually a blessing. Likewise, in Bakhtin's view, "only polyglossia fully frees consciousness from the tyranny of its own language and its own myth of language." Bilingualism was the norm until the 18th century, when educated men used Latin to communicate, while speaking their own different languages. Yet it somehow becomes a casualty today as nationalism imposes its rule. I'm thinking of "English Only" (in the US) and "Catalan Only" (in Catalonia) policies, for instance. Isn't that sheer short-sightedness? In your view, why is bilingualism considered a threat to national purity?

IS: Nationalism, as an ideology, functions as an exclusivist system of belief: either you're with us or against us. All such systems create an artificial diameter to separate what's included and what's left out. A history, a flag, a currency, a language [...]. Bilingualism, in this sense, signifies ambivalence, duality, a conflict of beliefs. All this, of course, is baloney.

On the question of Catalonia, I'm in favour –you're likely to be surprised– of secession. The idea of one Spain –*una España*– dates back to La Reconquista. The nation built itself as a unity by expelling its Jewish and Muslim minorities. It also coalesced as a sum of regions. But that sum has never found equilibrium. It has rested on repressive policies from the central government that have resulted in unnecessary subjugation. Franco's Spain was somewhat like Tito's Yugoslavia.

This is different to the United States in a number of ways. I just published a

book on the topic called *A Most Imperfect Union: A Contrarian History of the United States* (2014, with Lalo Alcaraz). *Los Estados Unidos* is a federal conglomeration of states. Its expansionist policies came about in the mid of the 19th century. It conquered territories that belonged to France, Spain, Russia, Mexico, and so on. English became a tool of homogenization.

In Spain, keeping alive the languages of the *autonomías* meant keeping their respective identities alive. “Catalan Only” is preposterous as a concept, yet it is coherent with Spain’s contemporary schizophrenic moment.

ID: In *A Most Imperfect Union*, you develop this strong reaction you have to nationalism.

IS: I can’t understand the logic of sacrificing oneself for a country. Why would anyone do it?

ID: Yet you’re condoning Catalan nationalism [...]

IS: I don’t endorse it. I’m simply saying it is coherent with a Spain that is fractured in its heart. In other words, I don’t believe Spain is an altogether modern nation. I prefer to think of it as a sum of disparate parts.

ID: What does the word “*frontera*” mean to you? I’m asking because in much Chicano/a writing and theorization of *La frontera*, the word *frontera* (in Spanish, as opposed to “Border”) has acquired a new, enriching meaning, as a hybrid space, as an in-between space where one needn’t be “either, or”, but “both, and” (cf. Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*). Do you inhabit that *frontera*?

IS: I define a border as an artificial division of space. Its logic is based on turf: what’s mine isn’t yours and vice versa. I believe borders are intrinsic to human nature; that is, they are needed as stratagems to differentiate individuals, families, groups, etc. The idealists among us might dream of a borderless future, yet that dream is impossible. From an early age, children, in the sand box, establish separations. The education we all receive at home emphasizes what makes each of us unique, “it distinguishes us”? –it separates us– from others.

As a Jew, I understand my fate as a border crosser. Not as a border eraser but as a border traveller.

ID: How about the words “exile” and “diaspora”: what do they bring to your mind as a Jewish person? Is Judaism an issue at all in your life and in your writing? Is it an integral part of your cultural heritage?

IS: It is the root, the foundation of everything. My Judaism is the key through which I open the different doors I cross.

ID: You used to be Mexican, now you are a Mexican-American, and your Jewish ascent defined you. Yet I have never seen you catalogued as a Jewish-American author. What portion of your identity belongs to each of those categories? But I would like a reply both in terms of cultural, religious and personal identity, and in literary marketing terms. I mean, where are you shelved in libraries?; or, put in other words: do you like finding your books in the shelves where you find them?

IS: Happily, in different shelves, which suits me well. I find it constraining to be in a single place [...]

ID: Yet you aren't in the same “shelf” with Saul Bellow, Cynthia Ozick, Philip Roth, and Paul Auster.

IS: I'm not a Jewish-American author. I'm a Jew of Mexican descent who lives in the United States. In that sense, I'm closer to Isaac Bashevis Singer, who was a Yiddish-speaking, Polish Jew who immigrated to America.

To be honest, Isabel, I couldn't care less about which shelf my books are in. For a number of reasons. First, because in the age of the internet, books aren't sold in bookshelves anymore, or at least not the majority of them. In libraries, books are shelves by number, by country, by theme, and so on. Second, I don't want to be in a predictable shelf readers approach in order to find what they are looking for; I would rather surprise them, offer them the unexpected.

Lastly, I don't want to be typified. I have spent my life delving into an assortment of themes. My main principle has been to explore diverse territories and, more than anything else, not to repeat myself. I equate repetition with immobility. And immobility equals death. If I had a choice, I would like to be in many shelves at once. Or else, to have my own shelf.

ID: Let me now ask you very broad but intriguing questions. Why do you write literature: creative literature, autobiography, fiction?

IS: I like testing my limits. I like experimentation. I like using different languages, concretely and metaphorically. And I'm allergic to repetition. As for fiction and nonfiction, while they are diametrically different, what unites them is autobiography, for, as you know, all writing is autobiographical.

ID: And, conversely, why do you write *about* literature and culture? Do you think literary criticism can also be *personal* criticism, or a way of writing autobiographically?

IS: Because I see things reflectively, associatively. For me to explain things is to reinvent them. That probably comes from my Jewish upbringing. I read the world Talmudically: sorting it out, explaining how it functions.

As I mentioned before, all criticism –without exception– is personal. In my view, everything I've written over the years amounts to an ambitious, all-encompassing autobiography.

ID: Finally, why are you a translator?

IS: I live in five languages. I need to negotiate between them. And, as a translator, I'm the bridge between various linguistic habitants. To me translating is like breathing.

ID: Memory is very important for the exiled or the immigrant being. The need to go back to one's roots; to recapture a lost language or a lost culture; the quest for what is in danger of being forgotten [...] You have written a novella called *The Invention of Memory* (1996). And in *Return to Centro Histórico* (2012) you recapture your Mexican-Jewish past. In it there is a sentence I want you to dwell on: "The imperative is to explain to ourselves not how far we've travelled in our journey of assimilation but how truthful we've remained to our origins." How truthful are you to your origins? What is memory for you? What role does it play in your creative process?

IS: Memory is the fountainhead, Isabel: remembrance leads to certainty, forgetfulness to exile. Indeed, memory is our most precious asset. Who are we without it? In the epilogue to my memoir *On Borrowed Words* (2001), there is an episode about a woman I once saw at the Houston airport who had lost her sense of self. She no longer remembered who she was, what had brought her there, where she was going. I remember looking at her –studying her– attentively. Every few minutes she looked into

her purse, mechanically, without knowing the reason, as if looking for something [...] but what? She repeated the action for a long time. Finally, the authorities were alerted. They questioned her as I sat not too far from where she was. She couldn't answer the most basic questions: her name, her age, her address, and so on. In other words, having been someone she had suddenly become a no one.

I often think about my past. And I think about thinking about my past. Remembering for me is about *what* I recollect and also about *why* I recollect.

How truthful am I about my origins? Well, the past is one thing and another altogether different what we remember and make of it. I am truthful not to what happened but to the memory I have of what happened. That memory often shifts. After I write about an incident, I wonder: is this what really happened? For instance, when the early copies of *On Borrowed Words* arrived to my mailbox, I surprised myself thinking: is this me? Is this the person I chose others to know as Ilan Stavans? What have I left out? And is what I didn't talk about more important –more lasting– than what I opted to narrate? This is a Möbius strip.

ID: Let's now address Hispanic literature, of which you are a teacher, a critic, and an expert translator in the US. Not long ago, my university hosted a conference entitled "World Literature: A View from Global Spanishes." One of the plenary talks was entitled "When Cervantes became world Literature". Do you think Spanish/Hispanic Literature is today part of world literature?

IS: Are you kiddin'? When Goethe, in the early 19th century, used the concept of *Weltliteratur*, he hinted at a transnational, e.g., European tradition. Cervantes is the apex of that tradition, or one of them. The problem with Spanish literature, of course, is that aside from *Don Quixote*, almost nothing is taken seriously outside from the Spanish-language habitat: not Quevedo, not Benito Pérez Galdós, not Camilo José Cela. Well, maybe the Spanish Civil War poetry, in particular Federico García Lorca. But is he part of that generation? As for Hispanic Lit, there is enormous enthusiasm for the branch that comes from the Americas: Borges, Neruda, Cortázar, Rulfo, García Márquez, Vargas Llosa [...]

ID: Excuse my asking but what is "world literature" for you?

IS: Any literature today is world literature. Even when readers approach books through the prism of nationalism, the global world pushed them immediately out of their

boundaries. In that sense, the first truly “world literature” title is the Bible, followed by *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Eneid*. By the way, Jewish literature, in my eyes, fits into Goethe’s view of *Weltliteratur*: it transcends national boundaries, meaning it is global.

ID: How so?

IS: Since the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in Jerusalem in the year 70 of the Common Era, Jews have maintained their cultural heritage while also inserting themselves in various diasporas: Mordechai Richter was Canadian Jewish, Philip Roth is American Jewish, Bruno Schulz was Polish Jewish, and Isaac Babel Russian Jewish. They simultaneously thrived in two cultural traditions, the Jewish one being a connector, a kind of common ground among them.

ID: You also belong to that core ground as well.

IS: I do.

ID: In reaction to what you just said, as a Spanish scholar, with respect to American *Hispanismo*, I’m concerned with the study of “Spanish” in the United States. Again, you’ve been at the crossroad of that exploration: how what is called here in the U.S. “*lo peninsular*” (i.e., actual Spanish literature) is losing ground (in journals, university curricula, reading lists in general, MLA conferences, etc.) against the Latin American. This is a tricky question, for sometimes there is open confrontation between Latin Americanists and “*peninsularists*” due to academic positions in departments, etc. I’m not only interested in the present state of affairs, but also about where Spanish literature is going in the U.S. Are we heading towards doctoral programs where no Spanish classics will be read, or even toward majors where no peninsular literature will be seen?

IS: Yes, we are [...] Again, beyond Cervantes, Spain is seen, to invoke T.S. Eliot, as a wasteland. One might say that it was *Don Quixote* what sank the Spanish Armada. Its literature is, in general, tame and uninspiring. Am I generalizing? What about ‘Clarín’? Benito Pérez Galdós? What about the poetry of the Spanish Civil War (García Lorca, Machado, Guillén, Hernández)? Well, I say also: what about them? As a tradition, Spanish literature is uninspiring. It doesn’t have the stamina, the pyrotechnics of its English or French counterparts.

I know I will get much rap for this opinion. Yet why hide it? I'm an unredeemed lover of Quevedo. And, of course, I've read my share of Unamuno, Jacinto Benavente, Miguel del Valle Inclán, Camilo José Cela, Javier Marías, Antonio Muñoz Molina, et al. Frankly, nothing to write home about. Actually, to me the literature about Spain (Hemingway, W.H. Auden, Stephen Spengler, Koestler, and George Orwell) is infinitely more appealing.

ID: You wrote a biography of Gabriel García Márquez's first forty years. Gabo, as he was known, passed away not long ago. You were interviewed on NPR, Aljazeera, and various TV programs. You also wrote a eulogy in English in *The New Republic* and, in Spanish, in Spain's *La Razón* and Chile's *El Mercurio*. Among other things, you suggested that if *Don Quixote* is the first modern novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) is the best. Gabo's oeuvre is credited for being a landmark for Hispanic Literature. What happened after "El Boom" in terms of Hispanism? What other major contribution, alongside Magical Realism, has Latin America given us?

IS: I'm not sure the concept of Magical Realism is useful, as I state in *Gabriel García Márquez: The Early Years* (2010). But let's not concentrate on that idea now. "El Boom" not only renewed world literature, it also brought Latin America to the banquet of Western Civilization. When the novels that belong to this aesthetic movement came along, the region was defined by dictatorship. Democracy and liberalism are the "sine qua non" today. In my skewed opinion, it was "El Boom," championing the imagination that helped reorganize the continent's entire ideological landscape. A pretty astonishing revolution, mind you!

ID: In 1997, Gabo advocated against the tyranny of orthography. This is an interesting issue to remember these days when, with the advent of social networking, the use of portable devices for quick communication via text messages and whatsapp, the practice of simplifying the Spanish language is increasingly common. Do you think technology will finally win the battle over linguistic orthodoxy?

IS: There is no opposition here, Isabel. Orthography isn't at war with technology. Eternally fluid, language always adapts to the circumstance. Adapting words to fit text messages isn't unlike using acronyms in advertising, business, and entertainment: ATM, ID, RSVP, ESL, AM and PM, ASAP, BC and CE, PS, IE and EG, etc.

ID: You have also written extensively about Borges, Neruda, Octavio Paz and Cervantes. What is the “canon” of Spanish/Hispanic literature in the U.S. academia? Do literary awards (the Cervantes, the Nobel Prize, etc.) modify the canon?

IS: The Latino minority in the United States will soon reach 60 million, which is more than the entire population of Spain. The interest in Latin America is driven by this demographic growth as well as by the closeness of Gringolandia to Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean Basin.

ID: Speaking of all this, it seems to me that American *Hispanismo* has a complex (and more realistic) view of what are the Spanish peninsular studies, including Portuguese, Catalan, Basque, and Galician. One may even think that, due to nationalistic reasons, you have moved to the furthest extreme, so much so that the word “Spanish” has been removed from the name of some departments (i.e. Stanford) to become Dept. of “Iberian Studies.” What room do the other peninsular literary traditions and languages (Catalan, Basque, and Galician) have in American Spanish/Hispanic/Iberian Studies/Romance Languages Departments?

IS: A minuscule one. Interest in Spain’s semi-autonomous regions is almost non-existent. When it does register in the scale, is as endangered minorities.

ID: In her book *La loca de la casa* (2003), Rosa Montero rejects what she calls “militant writing”, because, as she puts it, “one writes in order to learn; and one cannot initiate a journey of self-discovery carrying along ready-made answers.” Moreover, Montero openly states that the famous “writer’s commitment” shouldn’t be understood as putting one’s work *for* the cause. For her, that is “pamphleteering utilitarianism”. As an expert in Latino literature in the U.S., which often is stately “militant,” do you think writing used only to transmit a message is treason to the principal function of writing, to its real sense, which is the quest for meanings? Or do you think that literature cannot help being a political weapon?

IS: You’re simplifying the dichotomy. Literature isn’t therapy, nor should it be an ideological pamphlet. But *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, among other things, is a political book. In other words, literature can’t avoid being political. Yet when it sells itself for a cheap message, it becomes an unappealing whore. Latino writing in the U.S.

is political in large part because the condition of the Latino minority in this country has been one of abuse and isolation, a target of racism and xenophobia. Sharp, enduring literature transcends those conditions without forgetting them.

ID: My next question might politically incorrect, yet here it goes. I'm going to mention three big Latino names. I want to know why those three authors, applauded by European Americanists, are somehow despised, or underrated, or excluded from certain Latino canons in American academia. The names: Gustavo Pérez-Firmat, Richard Rodriguez, and Ilan Stavans.

IS: I too believe they should be left out. They belong in a less parochial landscape, don't you think?

As an intellectual, I exist in conflict: it's what makes me tick. To be happy, to be accepted isn't of interest. My duty is to thinking, and to do so thoroughly, no matter how dangerous, how unattractive my thoughts might be. In other words, the duty of the intellectual isn't to please but to doubt.

If occasionally animosity comes in with the territory, so be it. I find the mind set of Hispanists in American academia numbing. The same goes for a vast number of Latino scholars. This makes my role all the more crucial, all the more exciting. No, I'm not a Robinson Crusoe. I'm a citizen of my time and space; that is, I respond to the forces that surround me. I just dislike complacency. That, in a nutshell, is my *raison d'être*.

ID: I now want to talk about American Studies. For ideological reasons, its aesthetics has fallen into disrepute. The field, from various positions, is denounced as repressive, immoral, fetishistic and ideological. It has been accused of elitism, and even "fraudulence." To such degree has cultural theory been the focus of American Studies during the last thirty years that to raise questions about the literariness of texts and its aesthetic function might appear suspiciously reactionary. What is, in your view, more important in literature: ethics or aesthetics?

IS: It is unadvisable, even foolish to divorce them: the form matters as much as the content. What I find obnoxious is the insatiable reductionism that turns a text into an object of scientific study. After reading, the first, urgent question one must always ask is, did I enjoy it? Is it beautiful? Why? Once those aesthetic appreciations are established, one is able to enter the text in full. How does it function? What is its structure? Which context did it emerge from? In what way are readers prone to it? Literature never exists in isolation. Nor are its interpretations fixed. Everything is fluid in its pages.

ID: Throughout the years, you have written your autobiography in various formats. *On Borrowed Words* looks at your education from the perspective of language. Your graphic novel *El Iluminado* (2012) delved into your Jewish past. In *Resurrecting Hebrew* (2008), you explore your life in Israel. And in several essays included in *A Critic's Journey* (2010) you meditate on your life as a cultural critic and public intellectual. Indeed, autobiography somehow is in your entire oeuvre. In fact, life-writing would also include the transcription of this conversation we're engaging in now. Ethnic autobiography in the U.S. states a case for the value of the ethnic self, and many ethnic autobiographers also embrace the baffling question of group identity: how group identities contribute to the self a crucial part of self-definition. The problem with this is that, on the whole, Latino writers are expected to speak for their people, as emblems, representative, perhaps even symbols. That prescriptive demand is likely to impose limits on the expression of individualism. As a Jewish-Mexican-American autobiographer, do you write about yourself as an individual, or about the communal experiences of the group?

IS: I don't represent anyone, nor do I speak for any group. Making such alliances would mean an abandonment of my freedom. And freedom, Isabel –to say what I want, whenever I want to– is the value, the idea I cherish the most. Athletes are endorsed by corporations, politicians are endorsed by constituencies. In contrast, intellectuals are –or ought to be– free.

ID: I'm interested in your views on literary courses. Do you think literary history is important to understand a particular author? Or do you tend to favour single-author courses? Is it useful for students to know Cabeza de Vaca's *Naufragios*, or Christopher Columbus' *Letters to the Spanish Monarchs* in order to fully understand and value other travel narratives, such as *Don Quijote* or William Bradford's *Plymouth Plantation*?

IS: I teach three types of courses. The first is around a single book: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, for instance, or *Don Quixote*. The entire course is devoted to analysing every aspect in it, from style to content, from history to biography, politics, economics, jurisprudence, religion, gender [...]. The second is about an author: Borges, or else Roberto Bolaño. We study the arch of the writer's career from his beginnings to his death. And the third is ambitiously broad thematic courses in the Humanities: "Love," from the Greek to the internet; the history of God from polytheism to atheism;

Spanglish; a course called “Forbidden,” which analyses the role of prohibition in our life; “Impostors,” seen from the perspective of theatre, psychology, politics, etc.; and “The Bible as Literature.”

ID: Does “Latin American literature” exist? Or is it parceled by countries, by geographical areas?

IS: Latin American literature exists in the same shelf with European, African, and Asian literature. They are abstractions but the human mind apprehends the world through those abstractions. For without abstractions, we wouldn’t be able to think. What unites Dante, Rabelais, and Molière? The accident of geography, I say, and perhaps the desire to be seen as partners. But each has a different language and belongs to another cultural tradition. In fact, Latin Americans like Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz, Sarmiento, and Rubén Darío have more in common: they share the same tongue. Yet they belong to different national projects. Given the economics of education, it is difficult to teach Argentine, Mexican, Cuban, and Brazilian –let alone Nicaraguan– literatures as parallel paths. It’s cheaper, more efficient to dump them into one.

ID: My colleagues from the Spanish Department at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid tell me that, whereas Hispanic Literature in the United States is much more Latin American than “peninsular”, students prefer Spain for their “Study abroad” experience. Is that true? If so, why?

IS: Sure. Although at times it is hard to recognize it, Spain is in Europe. And Europe, in the map of American higher education, is still the cradle of civilization. Going to Europe means going to the root, even if Spain at times feels like an uprooted root.

ID: My next question refers to “Transatlantic spaces of dialogue”, and whether such a thing really exists in our studies. This affects my field, American Studies: we, Spanish North-Americanists sometimes overrate and overvalue what is done in the field in the U.S., and tend to feel somehow inferior as scholars when we compare ourselves with our American colleagues. It probably happens because we are aware that most U.S North-Americanists –there are some exceptions, of course– seldom, if ever, read or include in their research critical work on American Studies produced by non-Americans. Does the same phenomenon occur in American Peninsular

***Hispanismo?* I mean, is it the case that Spanish Hispanists do not look at what is done in the US and vice versa?**

IS: Yes, Spanish *Hispanistas* live in a bubble, unconcerned with the rest of the world. The rest of the world ignores them too. In other words, it is a lose-lose situation.

ID: Again, you've written extensively about "borrowed words," bilingualism, and you have become infamously famous for defending Spanglish as a hybrid language that is comparable to Yiddish, but you have also prophesized that it will become an important *mestizo* language in the future. If speaking a language is to inhabit, to construct, to register a specific environment—a "worldliness", in the words of George Steiner, if it means occupying and traversing a unique landscape in time, it is not surprising that many Hispanics who live between two cultures claim that border territory or the hybrid Spanglish as a worldliness they have the right to inhabit. But orthodoxy does not seem to recognize linguistic hybridity... I'd like you to (again, for this audience) elaborate on this issue and on why you think the *Real Academia Española de la Lengua* rejected your views on Spanglish. Is it a question of being a retrograde institution, as you said somewhere before? In my view, there are many Spanishes, not just Castilian Spanish, and all of those varieties are recognized by the Academy, and even studied at schools in Spain (the Latin-American variations). Why, then, such reluctance to accept Spanglish?

IS: My impression is that Spanglish is seen as a threat by the *RAE*.

You've probably heard me say this before. Is there someone who hasn't? The *Real Academia Española* is a dinosaur institution: retrograde in its approach to language, conservative in its beliefs, out of sync with the modern times. Spanglish represents change. It is the most significant linguistic phenomenon taking place in the Hispanic world these days. Frankly, I can't see how anyone remotely interested in philology would discard it as either non-existent or insignificant, as Victor García de la Concha did –consistently– during his tenure at the helm of the *RAE*. It doesn't bode well, or else it is an outright embarrassment, when the Spanish academic elite formulate its rejection of Spanglish in public. They become the laughing stock of the media, the general public, and thinking people anywhere else on the globe. And, of course, in doing so, they give me more visibility. I will be more than happy to relinquish my

opposition to the RAE when its members become a bit more enlightened. I'm tired of pointing out the obvious.

ID: And, one questions that is tangentially related, about Puerto Rican linguistic policies: If and when Puerto Rico actually becomes the 51st state of the Union, do you think PR will be allowed to preserve Spanish and become a bilingual state?

IS: Not if it becomes a state.

ID: Let's move now to the topic of Hispanics and Latinos in the U.S. How has the "Hispanic condition" in the U.S., as you call it, developed since you first described it, almost twenty years ago, in your 1995 volume of the same title?

IS: Latinos are close to 60 million –a republic within the republic. In numerous places, they are a majority. This means that the Hispanization of the United States is advancing unabated. In other words, we are finally witnessing a growing middle-class with roots in Mexico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Central America, and so on. There is a growing media devoted to it as well as a reinvigorated corporate drive. After all, this middle class represents the fastest-growing market in the country, especially among people between 15 and 35. My belief is that a new sensibility is being born –a new civilization.

ID: You are the general editor of a massive *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*, a book that a Spanish scholar I much admire, Felipe Fernández-Armesto, described as "Imaginatively conceived, painstakingly executed, stunningly broad, profoundly stirring, endlessly engaging, this book can change the way the world thinks about America, and the way Americans think about themselves". And I fully agree. How does one put together an anthology of such proportions? How does one decide who to include and who to leave out?

IS: It took thirteen years to be completed. At one point, I thought I would die without seeing the project come to fruition. I put all my energy –all my might– into it. As you know, every anthology creates its own double: the anthology with everything one included, and the anthology with everything one excluded. The hope is that the former will supersede the latter.

ID: As a follow-up of my last question, it seems that, besides Norton, each of the big academic publishing companies, such as Cambridge, Routledge, etc., are commissioning and publishing histories of and companions to Latino literature. Is this the result of a step away from the ghettoized academic territories of Chicano, Cuban-American, and Puerto Rican Studies?

IS: Yes, we have finally become whole.