



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

RMST 202

Romance Studies,
Modernism to the Present

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A World of Difference

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A World of Difference

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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So that was Romance Studies?

You now have some clues as to how to tackle Chilean, Brazilian, Romanian or Catalan novels. I hope that difficulty will no longer put you off. I hope that you now expect more of yourself, too.

You have concepts that you can put to use
in further expanding your horizons in
whatever direction you choose.

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What you do with all this is up to you.
You, too, are tasked with inventing
Romance Studies.



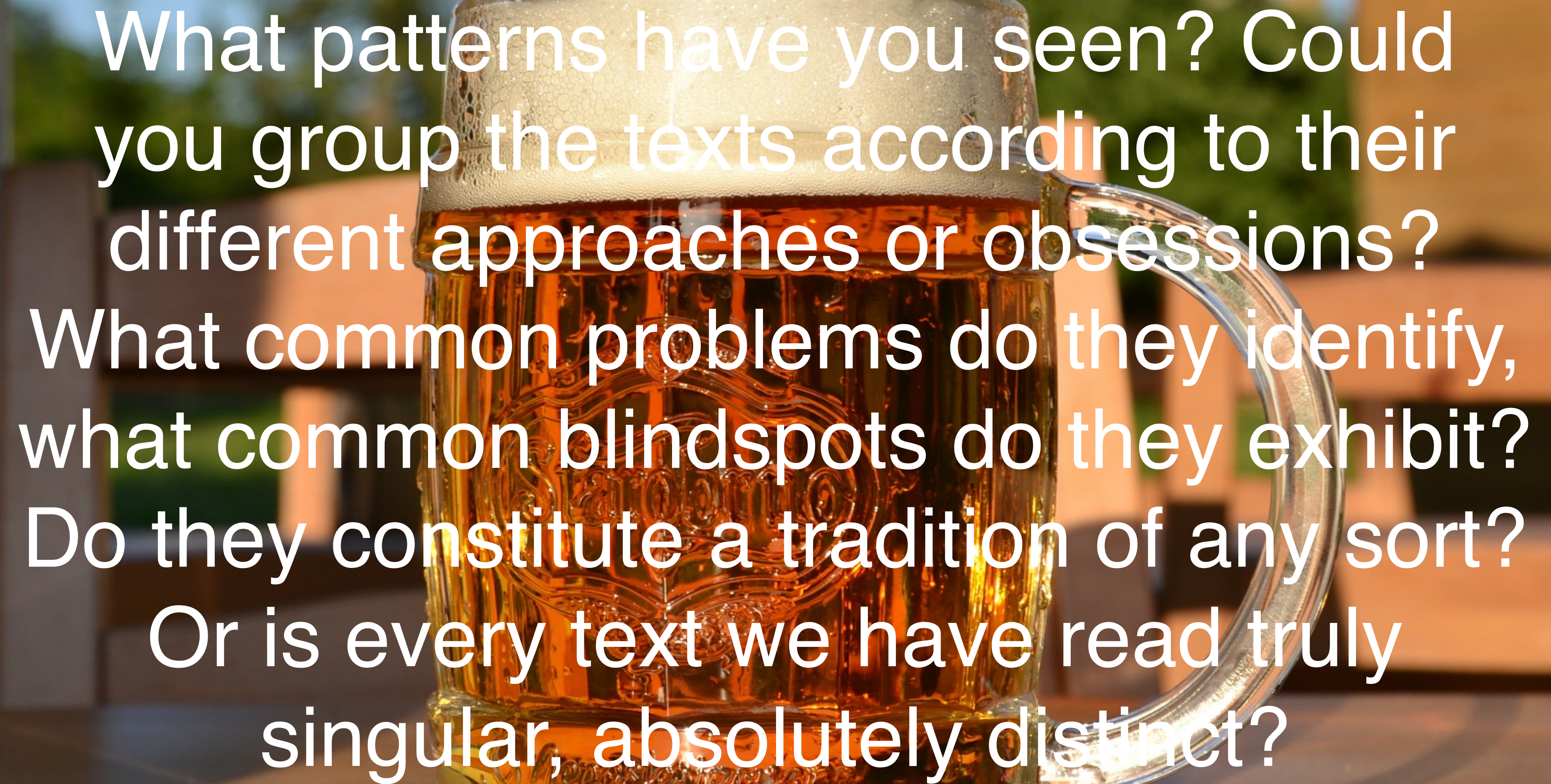
PATTERNS OF COMMONALITY AND DIFFERENCE

What patterns have you seen? Could you group the texts according to their different approaches or obsessions?

What common problems do they identify, what common blindspots do they exhibit?

Do they constitute a tradition of any sort?

Or is every text we have read truly singular, absolutely distinct?

A close-up photograph of a glass mug filled with beer, topped with a thick, white head of foam. The glass has a textured, embossed design. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with warm, golden light, suggesting a patio or balcony. The text is overlaid in white, sans-serif font.

What patterns have you seen? Could you group the texts according to their different approaches or obsessions? What common problems do they identify, what common blindspots do they exhibit? Do they constitute a tradition of any sort? Or is every text we have read truly singular, absolutely distinct?

Texts are singularities: abstraction, required even to talk about them, let alone to compare them, inflicts a form of violence.

Every text is a Rorschach Test on which we project our own anxieties and desires, whether we know it or not.

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But it is this that enables us to talk about them, as literature becomes a catalyst for the exploration of a shared political unconscious.



GROWING UP AND BETRAYAL



Children inhabit a world that is like our own,
but not quite, that is familiar but distant.

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but not quite, that is familiar but distant.

There is something traumatic about
achieving maturity that seems to call for
narrative, for a tale to be told that would
justify and explain that transition.

In returning to such crucial narratives, these novels inevitably also question them, by revisiting the trauma that coming-of-age stories both conceal and preserve.

Turning to a child's perspective on the adult world, is also a mode of defamiliarization. It enables an account of social practices in which not everything is taken for granted.

Adults do not always have good answers,
and another world is possible, even if our
capacities to imagine that otherness
have been dulled over time.

A child's voice can militate against the habituation that ensures that the arbitrary workings of power go without saying, are so naturalized that they can almost seem invisible.

A child's perspective can make the unseen visible, registering what otherwise goes without comment, enabling "a new distribution of the sensible" that implicitly questions why some things (some viewpoints, some people) "count" and are recorded, while others are not.

Many of these novels also both partake in
and subvert an account of social and
aesthetic history in terms of “modernity”
and “postmodernity.”

The priority of the present over the past is questioned and even overthrown in texts as varied as those by Bombal, Zobel, or Agualusa, for whom the more pertinent opposition might be the spatial hierarchy between centre and periphery, which they also propose to challenge and dispute.

All these texts, in one way or another, turn against tradition. They manifest a drive to innovate, to do things differently, to start again, to rewrite the rules.

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Something always escapes.

A literary text always seeks the limits of language, to trace the shifting frontier between what can and cannot be said, between the sayable and the unsayable.

Each text discloses or reveals something about the discourses against which it rebels, if only by showing that things could have been said otherwise, that there is nothing natural or pre-ordained about the relationship between words and things.

The hallmark of literary representation is that it is an unfaithful representation of the real: the most literary texts are those that betray that infidelity even as they indulge in it themselves.

There is something slippery and excessive about all the texts that we have read. They cannot fully be trusted, they do not exactly fit within the moulds that we may have prepared for them, they cannot exactly be grasped or pinned down.

There is no secret key to their “true” meaning. They are always on the move, they exceed their original contexts while their meanings multiply and change in the new contexts in which we read them. They move us in different ways depending on our own contexts and experiences.

They open up a world of difference!



ROMANCE STUDIES AS MINOR LITERATURE

The novels we have read transgress the boundaries of the “Romance languages” and make a mockery of any notion of a “Romance world.” They pick up on, reflect, and turn against multiple traditions.

Any account of Romance Studies must fit within larger geographies and histories, rather than pretending that there is something “resistant” in the mistaken idea of a “Romance world.”

“A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language.” (Deleuze and Guattari)

French, Spanish, Portuguese and so on
are increasingly “minor,” no matter
how many millions of speakers and
learners they may have.

Above all as literature in translation,
Romance literature becomes minor
literature, a vector of deterritorialization,
flight, and betrayal relative to
global monolingualism.

“The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation.” (Deleuze and Guattari)

“We might as well say that minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature.”

(Deleuze and Guattari)

The novels we have read are infrapolitical, in that they concern the conditions of possibility for politics as much as for revolution, or rather the conditions of possibility for a revolution that might be an escape or flight from the political.

Their “collective assemblage[s] of enunciation,” bring together diverse materials and bodies—human and non-human, animal and other.

Romance Studies would be about inventing new assemblages, new concepts, with this minor literature, to escape the deadening homogenization of bureaucratic reason.



MUSIC

Pianochocolate,
“Romance”



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