

*in collaboration with*

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## *Maria Chapdelaine in Iberoamerica*

Hernández Catá's Translation of the  
French-Canadian Classic

**C**anada's links with Cuba did not start with the beginning, some twenty years ago, of the flood of tourists to the Caribbean island to escape the harsh winter. They go back at least to the early 18th Century, when Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville et d'Ardillères, a French soldier and adventurer who has been immortalized in Quebec's topography, died, "likely of yellow fever," on July 9, 1706, "probably at Havana, Cuba." At the time, d'Iberville was engaged in "the plundering of the English colony of Nevis in the West Indies"; his last campaign in that period of "desperate colonial competition and savage border wars." (Marsh, II 857)

Two lesser-known connections are that of the Irish-Canadian revolutionary William Albert Charles Ryan (b. ca. 1841) and the celebrated railroad-builder, Sir William Van Horne. Van Horne, after retirement as president of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1899, was hired to direct the building of the Camagüey to Santiago rail link in Cuba. (Marsh, III 1890). Ryan was executed in Santiago de Cuba in 1873 following the failure of the "Virginus" expedition. Spanish colonial authorities seized the ship carrying independence fighters, including Ryan, and summarily shot them. (A portrait of Ryan hangs in Havana's Castillo de la Real Fuerza (Captain-General's Museum). He has been painted more recently by the Cuban-born Canadian artist Harry Tanner, and will soon be the subject of a film by Peter Blow.)

But perhaps the least known of all the nexuses between Canada and Cuba

is the fact that the first Spanish translation of Louis Hémon's French-Canadian classic, *Maria Chapdelaine*, was done by a major Cuban novelist, short-story writer and essayist, Alfonso Hernández Catá. In this article, we shall speculate on the reasons why Catá undertook to translate Hémon's best-seller—for there is little documentation thereon—and examine his translation strategies, their strengths and weaknesses.

**T**he son of a high-ranking Spanish military officer and a Cuban mother, Catá was born in Aldeadávila de la Ribera, Salamanca province, Spain, on June 24, 1885, and died in an air crash in Rio de Janeiro on November 8, 1940, after a distinguished double career as a diplomat and writer. (Curiously, Louis Hémon, born five years before Catá, died in a train accident near Chapleau, Ontario, at 33, on July 8, 1913.)

Catá's mother was already pregnant with him when the family moved briefly to Spain. But they soon returned to Santiago de Cuba, where he studied in elementary and secondary schools until he was 14, although he did not complete his baccalaureate. Now a widow, his mother sent him to a college for orphans of military personnel in Toledo, Spain. Not finding the military life to his liking, he ran away to Madrid, then returned to Havana in 1905. Thus ended his formal schooling, although he was described as having “una vasta erudición de autodidacta” and being a man of “una cultura extraordinaria” [a broad self-taught erudition; extraordinarily cultured] (Gutiérrez 13) with a considerable knowledge of languages, literature, music, psychology, psychiatry and history.

During his Madrid sojourn, he is said to have lived a “Bohemian life” not unlike that of Hémon in London, England (1902-1911), but also frequented the literary *tertulias* at which leading writers of the time read from their works. He also worked as proofreader and translator, all the while writing in his spare time. On his return to Cuba, he began a career as a journalist and editor in some of the leading dailies of the Cuban capital. Four years later he entered the diplomatic service, becoming Cuban consul in Le Havre (1908-1911). Later he served in Birmingham as consul (1911-1913) then returned to Spain, where he worked in various consulates before moving to the embassy in Madrid (1918-1925). He became Cuban ambassador in 1933. He was also a diplomat in Portugal, Panama, Chile and, finally, Brazil, where he died. The best of his production of novels, short-story collections, plays, essays, *zarzuelas*—all published in Spain—were considered to be of

equal or superior quality to that of his Spanish contemporaries, and his works were translated into French, English, German, Russian, Dutch, Portuguese, Italian and Lithuanian.

Catá's translation of Hémon's best-known work appeared in Madrid in 1923 under the title *María Chapdelaine. Novela Canadiense*, with a foreword by the Cuban's brother-in-law, Spanish writer Alberto Insúa, dated October 1922. The subtitle is very close to the original *Récit du Canada français* of the first Canadian edition (J.-A. LeFebvre, Montréal, 1916), and the first French editions (1916, Paris, Librairie Delgrave; 1921 ff., Paris, Grasset). It is likely that Catá read the first Grasset edition in 1921, but he may have perused the earlier serialized version that first brought *Maria Chapdelaine* to the attention of French readers (*Le Temps*, January 27-February 1914). Catá's translation appeared only two years after the standard Grasset edition. The first translations, in English, appeared that same year—1921. There were German and Danish translations the following year; and in 1923, in addition to Catá's rendering, there were editions in Dutch, Czech, Polish, and Swedish. (Lemire 670). The only other translation to appear in Spanish is one by Tomás Garcés, published in Barcelona (Librería Catálonia) in 1925 (Lemire 671).

At least one other edition of Catá's translation appeared under the simple title, *María Chapdelaine*, by Ediciones Selectas, Santiago, Chile, in 1924, with a foreword by Norberto Pinilla (in which, incidentally, there are a number of errors of fact, the Chapdelaines being called "campesinos franceses [...] residentes en Canadá" who suffer from "[l]a nostalgia de la tierra nativa" [French peasants living in Canada who long for their native land.] (I). It is this edition that was most readily available to us and that will serve here as our main point of reference. Page references to it will be preceded by the letter C, followed by the page number. The French-language edition that will be our point of comparison is that of Boréal Express, Montreal, 1980, which, for the first time, resurrected the author's original manuscript version, with minor corrections. It will be designated by B, followed by the page number.

What might have motivated Catá to translate Hémon's novel? It is difficult to say, given the paucity of documentary sources. When this question was recently put to her, Catá's granddaughter, Dr. Uva de Aragón Clavijo—who successfully defended her dissertation at the University of Miami in 1991 ("Modernismo y modernidad en la obra de Alfonso Hernández Catá")—answered: "According to my mother, Uva Marquez Sterling (her maiden name was Uva Hernández Catá), her father translated *Maria*

*Chapdelaine* because he felt [*sic*] in love with the novel. She recalls that as a youngster she was given a copy of the book to read, and that her father often praised Hémon's work and was very proud of having translated it. As far as she knows, he did it out of his own initiative and not at the request of any publisher." (Aragón Clavijo) After suggesting that Catá "probably read the novel when it appeared in *Le Temps*," she added: "I wonder if he ever met Louis Hémon."

We have no way of knowing whether or not he did. Nor do we have any direct documentation regarding Catá's undertaking of the translation. So we are forced into conjecture. Critical evaluations of Catá's work by Alberto Gutiérrez de La Solana and Félix Lizaso suggest some possible explanations.

Gutiérrez de La Solana (*passim*.) points out that Catá belonged both to Spain and to Cuba (just as Hémon's name is forever linked to his native France and French Canada). While Hémon pursued studies (in law and Oriental languages) considerably beyond those undertaken by the mostly self-taught Catá, these were done at the behest of his family, and his primary journalistic and writing interests were far removed from these fields. His love of adventure and travel and his independence make him a kindred spirit to Catá. Two of Catá's maternal great-uncles fought in Cuba's forces during the independence war of 1895, thus adding a possible "nationalist" element in his background. Members of Hémon's family, too, displayed Breton nationalist tendencies and a progressive outlook. His father Félix was described as a "[f]ervent régionaliste, défenseur de la langue bretonne qu'il maniait avec aisance," a "[r]épublicain convaincu, ennemi de Napoléon III [qui] nourrissait une grande admiration pour Victor Hugo avec qui il échangea plusieurs lettres durant l'exil de Jersey." (Trébaol 170). Hémon's uncle and namesake, Louis, too, fought for the teaching of the Breton language in the schools and was described as "un ardent défenseur de la culture." (Thomas 181) Thus, these elements in Hémon's family history may account for his interest in, and exploitation of, French-Canadian nationalism in *Maria Chapdelaine*. It is possible that Catá's family history may have made *him* receptive to these aspects of that novel.

La Solana also notes Catá's great admiration for Guy de Maupassant and naturalism. While there are few elements of naturalism in *Maria Chapdelaine*, numerous critics (most recently Frank Rannou) have pointed to its linguistic, social, economic and ethnographic realism—which, however, cannot be discussed without noting at the same time the mystical and

idealistic elements of Hémon's work that are manifest especially in the novel's dénouement. Still, it may be that Catá was attracted to the naturalistic-realistic features of the novel he chose to translate.

Another element of affinity seems to be the interest of both authors in moral conflicts and psychological analysis. Chilean writer Eduardo Barrios has said that Catá seemed to derive pleasure from his characters' suffering and that the main aesthetic pleasure of the author is that of pain (quoted in Gutiérrez 23). For *La Solana*, Catá's main protagonists were "el dolor, el sufrimiento y la muerte" [pain, suffering and death] (78). He also said that for Catá it was essential to probe the internal universe of the characters, and to analyse complex beings, his protagonists always findings themselves at a "crucijada espiritual" [spiritual crossroads] (Gutiérrez 213) Félix Lizaso, too, stressed this latter characteristic. He noted that for Catá external action was less important than his characters' inner lives. He gauged their motivations and doubts, and weighed the alternatives with which they were confronted. Lizaso also saw in Catá an essayist who chose the novel form to express his ideas (Lizaso 54-57). He says that the Cuban writer "ha sabido intercalar en sus libros una serie de teorías, de opiniones, de juicios [...] que dan a la obra una dimensión, un alcante mucho mas allá de la narración y de la trama" [knew how to inject into his books a series of theories, opinions, judgments...which give them a dimension and a breath that goes considerably beyond the narration and the plot] (Lizaso 57). Lizaso also points to the symbiotic relationship between Catá and his creative writing, calling him a "hombre lleno de opiniones y de enfoques, muchas veces de paradojas" [a man full of opinions, special angles and often paradoxes] (Lizaso 56) The critic compares Catá to Oscar Wilde "en esa actitud paradójal en que el alarde de inteligencia redundante en no saberse a ciencia cierta cual sea el partido del autor, capaz de defender con igual fervor y acento convincente tesis contradictorias" [in that paradoxical attitude in which the display of intelligence redounds in not knowing for sure what what choice the author is making, since he is able to defend with equal fervour and convincing emphasis positions that contradict each other] (Lizaso 56).

Clearly, Louis Hémon had similar concerns in *Maria Chapdelaine*. His presentation of the conflict besetting the Chapdelaine parents (e.g. the nostalgic dream of Laura for the settled communities versus Samuel's inexplicable penchant for constantly moving northward to begin the isolated pioneering process anew) and especially Maria's dilemma before her three

(and eventually, two) marriage choices, each having an adversarial ideological as well as emotional dimension, parallel Catá's novelistic preoccupations.

**R**egarding Catá's strategies of translation, one can say, in summary, that they are successful, even though Catá took certain liberties with the source text and failed to render particularisms and shades of meaning that escaped him. The dominant liberty taken is that of embellishing the original text, of poeticizing a work that already contained substantial lyrical elements, of making overly explicit the original subtleties and suggestiveness through rhetoricization and borrowed cultural/literary references. While Hémon's poetic touches are, on the whole, sober ones (this adjective certainly is not adequate to describe the mystical explosion of the three voices in the dénouement), Catá, at that point in his writing still under the influence of Latin American *modernismo*, couldn't resist adding qualifiers and images to the existing text. (This movement, launched by Rubén Darío in 1888 and dominant until around 1905, aimed at smashing the ethics and aesthetics of Romanticism. It stressed the complex of sensations, line, colour and a taste for the exotic, and renewed poetic language in the direction of art for art's sake. [Portuondo 626ff. and 819ff.] There are, too, a number of cuts in the translation, as well as inaccuracies (some the result of the errors in the Grasset edition), and a refusal or inability to find an equivalent for the particularisms of French-Canadian speech with its anglicisms and "archaïsmes."

Catá's additions and embellishments are part of his strategy of poeticizing of Hémon's text. One can say, in general, that while some of Catá's additions alter the text here and there, they do not effect radical transformations in it. Often Catá used these additions to make clearer to the Spanish-language reader what Hémon assumed his French-language readers could readily understand. The horizon of expectation of the original readers and that of the Hispanic ones was quite distinct. At the same time, some of the additions are unnecessary, and only encumber the text.

Near the beginning of the novel, Hémon described *en acte* the joviality of the male churchgoers, generalizing that "ces hommes appartenaient à une race pétrie d'invincible allégresse et que rien ne peut empêcher de rire." (B 2) Catá's rendering is a good example of his tendency to poeticize: "una raza [...] duena del supremo tesoro de la risa" [a race...mistress of the supreme treasure of laughter]. (C 9) (There is, at the same time, a slight weakening

of a poetic element of the original in the use of “dotada” [endowed] for “pétrée”—kneaded).

A little further on, during Maria and her father’s signal meeting with François Paradis, Hémon had simply put in Samuel’s mouth the following greeting: “François Paradis! s’exclama le père Chapdelaine” (B 8), which, expanded, becomes for Catá: “; Francisco Paradis!—exclamo cual si viesse un aparecido el tío Chapdelaine “[.. exclaimed old man Chapdelaine, as if he had seen a ghost]. This inappropriate image adds nothing to the original.

Maria, after meeting François again and experiencing a surge of love, sees her surroundings in a new way. Even the dark, menacing forest seems different: “tout ce qui l’entourait ce matin-là lui parut soudain adouci, illuminé par un réconfort, par quelque chose de précieux et de bon qu’elle pouvait maintenant attendre. Le printemps qui arrivait peut-être...ou bien encore l’approche d’une autre raison de joie qui venait vers elle sans laisser deviner son nom.” (B 9-10) The vagueness of the warm feeling that pervades her being, expressed succinctly, becomes overly elaborated and poeticized under Catá’s pen: “una luz tibia, confortadora, que se infiltraba en el alma con resplandores verdes para iluminar de esperanza los días venideros [...] Tal vez proviniese ese optimismo de la proximidad de la primavera o de algún misterioso florecimiento sin forma y sin nombre que avanzase de lo desconocido hacia ella, y cuyo influjo empezase ya a iluminar su alma” [a warm, comforting light, which infiltrated her soul with green radiance and illuminated with hope the days to come. Perhaps this optimism resulted from the proximity of spring or from some mysterious, nameless, shapeless flowering that moved towards her from the unknown, and whose power already began to brighten her soul]. (C 15)

Similarly, Azalma Larouche’s invitation to Samuel and Maria to spend an extra night with her (“C’est bien juste que Maria ait encore un peu de plaisir avant que vous ne l’emmeniez là-haut dans le bois,” B 11), is, this time, exaggerated negatively by Catá: “Justo es que María se divierte un poco antes de ir a enterrarse en su destierro del bosque” [It’s only right that Maria enjoy herself a little before going to bury herself in exile in the woods]. (C 16)

Catá idealized the heroine of Hémon’s novel to the point of making her a near replica of her sacred namesake. Here are some examples. François’s thoughts about Maria are marked by sensuality and desire, but also by tenderness: “une grande faim d’elle lui venait et en même temps un attendrissement émerveillé, parce qu’il avait vécu presque toute sa vie rien

qu'avec d'autres hommes, durement..." (B 69-70). For Catá, this becomes: "Francisco sentia verdadera hambre de toda ella. Y al mismo tiempo, sentia también un respeto casi religioso y una especie de maravillada ternura al pensar que aquella flor viva había nacido y se había abierto entre hombres, duramente" [François felt a real desire for all of her. At the same time, he experienced an almost religious respect and a kind of marvellous tenderness at the thought that this living flower had been born and had blossomed in the tough environment of men...]. (C 55) Here Catá not only added a religious element and the metaphor of the flower but also shifted the reference to François's life among rough men to Maria herself.

Catá added sacred qualifiers to Hémon's prose on other occasions as well. "Toute sa forte jeunesse, sa patience et sa simplicité sont venues aboutir à cela: à ce jaillissement d'espoir et de désir" (B 81) becomes: "Toda su fuerza juvenil, su paciencia y su inmaculada sencillez, se encienden para hacer mas alta la magnífica llama de su deseo" [All of her youthful strength, her patience and her immaculate artlessness caught fire and made the magnificent call of her desire speak louder...]. (C 62) Here, again, there is embellishment and expansion, but also the gratuitous contrast created by the added "inmaculada," and "su deseo."

An example of rhetoricization and *litteraturiza* occurs in the two renderings of the transformation of the face of the dead Laura, as seen through the eyes of Samuel and her children. Hémon noted the calm, refined paleness of Laura's face which, for her loved ones, resulted from "une métamorphose auguste et qui marquait combien la mort l'avait déjà élevée au-dessus d'eux." (B 182) For Catá, this becomes "aquella metamórfosis augusta que mostraba cuan por cima de ellos habia puesto la Parca, con solo tocarla, a su elegida" [that august metamorphosis that showed how high above them Fate, simply by touching her, had placed its chosen one]. (C 126)

Catá's deletions also affect Hémon's work. Early in the novel, young men outside the church of the opening scene discuss Maria's attributes, but one of them regrets her family's isolation: "C'est de valeur qu'elle reste si loin d'ici, dans le bois." (B 6) Catá dropped altogether the significant phrase, "dans le bois", one of the major ones of the novel, which (repeated with variations) underlines Hémon's stress on the physical ambience of the action. Immediately afterwards, too, Catá dropped (C 13) the italicized words in the phrase "cette belle fille *presque inaccessible*" (our emphasis, B 7), a possibly polysemic expression and a key attribute of the characterization



of Maria. Catá also cuts phrases that reveal the psychology of the character, keeping only Maria's simple affirmative "Sí" (C 31), when she learns of François's impending visit, but letting go the significant "et bénit l'ombre qui cachait son visage." (B 32)

Catá weakened the judgmental phrase "sans subtilité ni doute" (B 27), used by Hémon to describe the *habitants'* adoration of the God of the Scriptures (and possibly his own religious questioning), by his translation: "adoran sin que la menor sombra empañe su fe!" [adore without the slightest shadow cast over their faith]. (C 28)

Describing autumn, Hémon noted that "sur le sol canadien il est plus mélancolique et plus émouvant qu'ailleurs" (B 84-85), but Catá dropped the "mélancolique" (C 63) of that phrase which the original had used twice within the same sentence, obviously for emphasis.

More serious than the above deletions, and even the embellishments dealt with earlier, is the decision of the translator not to keep the anglicisms that traverse the text, or to find a colloquial Spanish or Cuban rendering for the *canadianismes* and *archaïsmes* of the source text. As is well known, Hémon's novel preserved many anglicisms in the speech of his characters as an integral part of his strategy of realism, and also to add "exoticism" for the French reader. Unchanged English words like "boss," "foreman," "track," "rough," "cash," and "gangs" abound; other words of English origin are integrated into French syntax by the author: "clairer" (to clear), "badrant" (worrisome), "toffe" (perseveres), "mouver" (to move). Canadianisms, especially, are everywhere: "icitte," "toé," "ben," "boucane," "Anglâs," "Canayennes," "écureux," "siau," "mon Dou," "batêche." (A number of these are also found in dialects in France. Rivard, *passim*.) All the particularisms mentioned above are translated by Catá in standard Spanish, never dialectally or colloquially. The last two of the Canadianisms listed are euphemistic renderings of religious terms, and there is evidently no exact counterpart to this phenomenon in Castillian, whereas it is a frequent socio-cultural sign in French Canada. ("Batêche," a euphemism for "baptême," is rendered by "Caramba," C 115, meaning "I'll be dashed!") Neither, it seems, is there an equivalent for Hémon's use in dialogue of "son père" and "sa mère" in direct address, another characteristic of French-Canadian popular speech found also in the Lyon region and in Switzerland. (Rivard 632). It should be noted, too, that Catá didn't translate some of these words (like "siau"), or mistranslated others, like "amitié" (meaning love—another euphemism, C

90; cf. B 125) and “raquette,” usually omitted in the translation but rendered wrongly as “pertiga” (rod, staff, C 103). This was probably due to his ignorance of the specificity of these words in the given context.

Critics who have commented on Hernández Catá’s attitude to literary language have stressed his general avoidance of particularisms in his own writing. According to de La Solana, Catá aimed at giving a universal quality to his own fiction, and thus dealt with “los problemas del hombre absoluto, prescindiendo de región o país determinados” [the problems of man in the absolute sense, dispensing with a specific region or country]. (Gutiérrez 29) To do this, he chose “un castellano culto [...] neutro por su falta de matices particulares de una región, de una clase o de un pueblo qui permita identificarlo con él de un país, una localidad o un grupo social o étnico determinado” [a cultivated and neutral Spanish without regional, class or national particularisms that would make it possible to identify it with that of a country, a region or a distinct social or ethnic group]. (Gutiérrez 137) While de La Solana notes Catá’s use of selected *Cubanisms* in some stories set in his homeland, these evidently were infrequent and are described as “toques sabiamente mezclados dentro de su prosa castellana [...]” [touches skillfully melded into his Spanish prose]. (Gutiérrez 183) One *Cubanismo* is found in Catá’s translation, namely “manigua,” meaning a piece of land covered with weeds and scrub. (Ortiz 345) It is used (C 39) to render the state of the uncleared land in the original: “Un beau morceau de terre qui a été plein de bois et de chicots et de racines.” (B 46) Also, in one of his additions, there is a clear Cuban source. Hémon had written, describing the inhuman effort needed to clear the land, “Il faut avoir besogné durement de l’aube à la nuit avec son dos et ses membres” (B 27), which Catá transformed thus: “es necesario haber trabajado con pertinaz rudeza, como un negro” [one had to have worked with persistent harshness, like a Negro, i.e. a slave] (C 28), obviously “contextualizing” the passage for his Cuban readers.

Catá, unlike Hémon in his original typescript, used “salvaje” (savage, i.e. Amerindian,) without quotation marks in the narrative passages, following the Grasset edition. But his sympathy for the aboriginal people was equal to Hémon’s, judging by the following additions to the original. Hémon had written: “ceux des ‘sauvages’ qui avaient fui les missionnaires et les marchands” (B 66), and Catá: “los salvajes que huyen perdiendo palmo a palmo su tierra ante la intransigencia de los misioneros y la codicia de los comerciantes” [the savages who flee, losing their land inch by inch to the

intransigence of the missionaries and the greed of the merchants]. (C 52)

Also, while occasionally weakening Hémon's recurrent "le pays de Québec" by using terms such as "región" "comarca" [territory], and "provincia" (equivalents of which the original text also used, showing an ambiguity as to Quebec's status that has a contemporary ring), Catá mostly used "país" and "tierra" (country, land), and even "corrected" Hémon's own watering down of his usual term in the essential words of the "third voice," that of Quebec. The original read: "Car en vérité, tout ce qui fait l'âme de la province" (B 197). It became: "Todo cuanto constituía el alma del país" [Everything that made up the soul of the country...]. (C 137)

It is clear that Catá's strategy of not attempting to render the specificity of French-Canadian language diverged from Hémon's. Only once does Catá use an original French-Canadian term, and italicize it: *godendard*, a two-handed saw. (C 65) (*cf.* Rivard 371). Yet Catá is generally quite faithful to the texture of the original, as in the close proximity of his translation of the key "voices" section of the dénouement to Hémon's original (with, however, certain of the same types of distortions—embellishments, cuts, changes—that were seen in the translation as a whole).

This sampling of comparisons between Catá's rendering and the original *María Chapdelaine* points to major problems of literary translation not only in Catá's day but in our own as well, such as how to treat colloquialisms and contextualized expressions, and how to preserve the spirit and style of the source text. Our conclusion is that Catá did an honourable job, with qualifications. By so doing, he established a unique literary link between Cuba and Canada.

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