

*THE BIRTH OF AN IDENTITY LANDMARK: SOME THEORETICAL NOTES
ON HISPANIC-AMERICAN MODERNISM*

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of social, political and cultural upheavals that Latin America goes through during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first two of the next (1880-1920), a new artistic movement is born: "modernismo". Initially regarded as a phenomenon almost exclusively lyrical, rooted in the poetic creation of Rubén Darío, modernism comes to be considered not only a literary school, but a form of expression sui generis which transposes the profound historical transformations experienced by the subcontinent until today. In this paper, we aim to provide a brief review of some theoretical aspects related to Hispanic-American modernism: definitions, typologies, stages, traits, as well as its manifestation in poetry and prose.

Keywords: Modernism, Latin America, mundonovismo, poetry, novel

While Europe was shaping the patterns of modern poetry, experimenting with novel ways of addressing human issues and new meanings of words, Latin America was the scene of intense turmoil; the subcontinent was feverishly seeking its road to progress, to democracy and freedom, ideals for which it was facing hardships that required to be overcome at the cost of great sacrifices. The realities of Latin America imposed upon the literature, the philosophy and the art of the New World a number of distinctive features – a more vigorous social dynamism, a deeper rooting in the historical context and a more vivid militant character – which reflected the complexity of modern life and, at the same time, the contradictory, fluctuating and restless artistic conscience of modern man.

Against the backdrop of these social, political and cultural upheavals, the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first two of the next (1880-1920) are witnessing a relatively complicated process from which a new artistic movement is born: *modernismo*¹ – it

¹ Under the name of "modernismo" there can be identified at least two distinct literary phenomena: the first one is culturally related to Hispanic America and Spain, whereas the second, which appeared later, is linked to Brazil and Portugal.

arises from bringing together heterogeneous creations which have as a common denominator finding those innovative ways of expression able to give voice to the compelling problems engendered by historical circumstances.

Thus, modernism emerges like an authentically Latin American literary movement, strong enough, as Harold Bloom stated, to have an echo on the Old Continent: it comes to decisively influence the literary activity in Spain and then Portugal, and to transform Latin America from the resonance box of major world events into the very irradiation center of a large creative manifestation. Meanwhile, such authors as Ángel Rama or Roberto Fernández Retamar elaborate on modernism as the cultural equivalent of the imperialist expansion of capitalism that characterized the relations between Europe and Latin America at the end of the nineteenth century.

Nowadays, reinterpreting the notion of modernism has followed two divergent but complementary directions: on the one hand, the concept has gradually acquired a meaning increasingly more comprehensive both in terms of its temporal extension as well as in terms of the degree of inclusion of authors and original works that had not been initially associated with the set of modernist opinions and ideas from an aesthetic point of view; on the other hand, there have been attempts to deepen ties between modernist literature and the socio-economic changeovers that took place in Latin America during the actual manifestation of the movement.

In the opinion of Iván Schulman, Hispanic modernism roughly comprises two different dimensions²: according to traditional criticism, this movement is a literary school whose roots are to be found in the poetic creation of Rubén Darío³ (i.e. *Azul/Blue* – 1888 and *Prosas profanas/Profane Prose* – 1896); in other words, it is a phenomenon almost exclusively lyrical, mainly due to the impingement that French Parnassians and symbolists, especially Verlaine and Baudelaire, exerted upon the poets of the New World; a miscellaneous cultural force, modernism has also nurtured itself from the unusual artistic sensitivity of English Pre-

² Iván Schulman, *El modernismo hispanoamericano*, Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1969, quoted in Ramón Luis Acevedo Marrero, *El discurso de la ambigüedad. La narrativa modernista hispanoamericana*, San Juan/Santo Domingo: Isla Negra Editores, 2002, p. 12.

³ Félix Rubén García Sarmiento, known under the pseudonym of Rubén Darío (1867-1916), is considered the father of Hispanic American modernism and the one who theorizes and spreads the modernist concepts throughout Latin America and, later, Spain, once he arrives in Madrid (1898). Along with him, José Martí, Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, Julián del Casal, and José Asunción Silva belong to the “first modernist generation”, and names like Amado Nervo, Leopoldo Lugones and Guillermo Valencia are to be counted among the disciples and, obviously, the followers of the Nicaraguan poet.

Raphaelitism, of Medieval poets, or of some iconic figures such as Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde or Gabriele D'Annunzio.

As its fundamental characteristics are the particular concern and attention paid to formal, aestheticizing elaboration (seeking the verbal harmony of verse through a renewing metrics which combines rhythm, color and plasticity), modernism has come to be defined as a literary direction that incorporates, in search of immaculate beauty, all the elements considered to be beautiful in other arts, such as music, painting, architecture, or dancing. Thus, the universe of poetry is built of sumptuous scenery and exotic objects, idealized situations and essentially cosmopolitan characters; there stand out the predilection for aristocratic elegance and pictorial descriptions, the rejection of everything prosaic, the inclination towards escapism and melancholy, skepticism and pessimism, the cultivation of sensoriality and sensuality, of exoticism and fantasy, of “pure”, disinterested art, opposite to political, social and economic immediate reality. The rigorous division of the world proposed by Romanticism is now being replaced by a transcendent and poetizing unity, just as the ugly, degrading, crude and distasteful aspects portrayed by regionalist Costumbrism, yield to the beauty, the decency and the delicacy that modernism discovers in situations, things and people. Likewise, the modernist creator is reflexive, lucid and critical with himself and with his own work, subjected to a permanent meditation; on account of him, the artistic elaboration intellectualizes itself, and the objectives turn precise, theorized. Consequently, poetry gains in Latin America, “besides the deep meaning of an effort, full of boldness and great artistic lucidity, to forge the lyrical patterns of a new way to feel and react to a new reality, also that of a method of replacing a new vision on reality with a manner of showing decorative images”⁴.

According to these innovative ideas it disseminates, modernism – “a great movement of enthusiasm and freedom towards beauty”⁵, as Juan Ramón Jiménez defined it – also entails an estrangement from all the values that had been cherished during previous centuries; often going to extremes, it stands for the systematic breaking of ties with the past, the scorn of the ancestors and the pursuit of novelty. Moreover, modernism encompasses all those ideological, artistic and literary movements which, “under spontaneous or planned forms”, express a detachment from tradition “by means of anti-classical, anti-academic, anti-traditional, anti-

⁴ Francisc Păcurariu, *Scriitori latino-americiani*, București: Editura pentru Literatură Universală, 1966, pp. 201-202 (our translation).

⁵ Juan Ramón Jiménez, *El Modernismo: notas de un curso* [1953], edición, prólogo y notas de Ricardo Gullón y Eugenio Fernández Méndez, México: Aguilar, 1962, p. 17 (our translation).

conservative attitudes of any kind, a repulsion sometimes pushed down to a radical negativism”⁶.

In contrast to this first and somewhat restrictive conception, there arises a second one, broader, deeper and more comprehensive, that can be summarized in the definition formulated by Federico de Onís, whose early interpretation succeeded triumph as a result of further research and theorizing: “Modernism represents the Hispanic form of the universal crisis of literature and of the spirit, which around 1885 started the dissolution of the nineteenth century and which would manifest itself in art, science, religion, politics and, gradually, in the remaining aspects of life, having so all the attributes of a profound historical change whose process continues today”⁷.

Seen from this angle, modernism is not a literary school, but the Hispanic American version of a universal or, at least, Western phenomenon, which acquires in Latin America, due to its peripheral condition, a form of expression *sui generis* that transposes the intense historical alterations the subcontinent has experienced until today. However, beginning with the last decades of the nineteenth century and despite its marginal position, Latin America enters modernity – aesthetically, this concept, rather ambiguous from author to author, was also developed and theorized by Baudelaire, who identified the modern beauty with “the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent”, and modernity with “the half of art, of which the other half is the eternal and the immutable...⁸”.

The New World was, therefore, going through a critical period, of major changes, of dissatisfactions and uncertainties; it repudiated the old values and it started looking for new ones. So, modernism appeared as the very first reaction of Hispanic American authors, as their groundbreaking answer to modernity: “The *modernistas* were the first writers to experience and appreciate the all-encompassing alteration in the fabric of life in Spanish America brought by modernity. The *modernistas* were the first to witness the tragic face of science as it robbed legitimacy from the religious, magical, and animic worldviews that had ruled the daily lives of most Americans since before the arrival of Columbus. The *modernistas* were the first to define the poet as both visionary and outcast, at odds with the dominant social values while striving to reveal those aspects of reality hidden by habit and convention (...). The *modernistas* were

⁶ Adrian Marino, *Modern, modernism, modernitate*, București: Editura pentru Literatură Universală, 1969, p. 101 (our translation).

⁷ Federico de Onís, “Sobre el concepto del modernismo”, in: *España en América*, San Juan: Editorial Universitaria, 1968, p. 176, quoted in Ramón Luis Acevedo Marrero, *op. cit.*, p. 12 (our translation).

⁸ Quoted in Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 8th edition, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, p. 5.

the first to live the perhaps irreconcilable tension between the search for a spiritual community and a sense of national identity, on the one hand, and a longing to participate in the world arena, on the other”⁹. It was the period of an anarchist aesthetics, without rules, without imposing models, when writers had the freedom to seek and find their own way of expression; a permanent quest, many times resulting from losing or challenging the traditional values, and which applied not only on a literary level, but also on a social, philosophical and existential one.

Modernism’s development in Latin America includes two phases: the first one is defined by attempts to appropriate, in a direct way, the literary and ideological elements, mainly European, associated with modernity; it is the period of exotism, of aestheticism, of centrifugal orientations, when every artist secludes himself in his ivory tower, ignoring the American reality surrounding him. The second phase foregrounds the awareness of the impossibility to transplant to America the European cultural forms without entailing radical changes. The personal, autochthonous element is claimed, and the whole focus is on expressing and interpreting what is idiosyncratically Hispanic American.

This whole new manner of perceiving and understanding the world, known as *mundonovismo*¹⁰, was stimulated at a collective level by nationalism and “Hispanic Americanism”, tendencies that saw a great recrudescence towards the end of the nineteenth century, along with the threat of United States’ political, economic and cultural expansion. It is the time when the writer turns to the beautiful and quite often painful national or regional reality, with the purpose of reincorporate it into his work and give it a new interpretation. At the level of artistic representation, he frequently transposes this overwhelming Hispanic American reality by the *telluric situation* or, put differently, by “the human confrontation with the endless expanses of the subcontinent, with a wonderful and at the same time menacing

⁹ Cathy L. Jrade, *Modernismo, Modernity and the Development of the Spanish-American Literature*, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1998, p. 5.

¹⁰ A literary term coined by the Chilean critic Francisco Contreras in 1917 to express his opposition to Hispanic American modernism and his literary preference for an emphasis on the daily life of people in the New World. It has been most frequently used with regard to such works as José Eustacio Rivera’s *La Vorágine* (1924), Ricardo Güiraldes’s *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926) and Rómulo Gallegos’s *Doña Bárbara* (1929). These works have been designated *novelas de la tierra* (novels of the earth) by Arturo Torres-Rioseco, and the latter term is favoured by critics such as Jean Franco and Carlos Alonso. Cedomil Goic, however, prefers the term *mundonovismo*, because he uses it to categorize not only novels of rural life such as those mentioned above but also urban novels that emphasize local roots or *regionalismo*. See Daniel Baldestorm, Mike Gonzalez (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Latin American and Caribbean Literature 1900-2003*, London&New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 371.

nature”¹¹. Exacerbated egocentrism, enhancement of personal consciousness, self-confidence, manifestation of personality and subjectivism, all these imply an absolute creative freedom, which enables him to develop his individuality without constraints of any kind. Self-referentiality, as the centerpiece of modernist literature, makes the writer a lucid individual, highly aware and concerned about the nature of his literary production; he is so much reflecting upon what constitutes the literary praxis, that his work becomes simultaneously its subject and its object, in other words, it becomes metaliterature. Ever since the beginning of modernism, the characteristics that were to become the quintessence of this literary movement have come forward with full force: artistic freedom, aspiration of renewal, syncretism, adoption and harmonization of the various tendencies, beauty of expression and, above all, originality, literary personalism, and desire to express what is typical by means of a language that meets the auctorial individuality.

In prose, as in poetry, modernism promoted a special care for the form and the rigorous selection of language through the recurrent use of symbol and metaphor, of musicality and exoticism of landscapes and sceneries. Furthermore, modernist prose does not circumvent reality in terms of its caricatural or unpleasant aspects; quite the opposite, both in delineating the characters as in describing the natural frame of action it stands out precisely by emphasizing those aspects of Hispanic American daily nature that can be habitually reckoned as grotesque or disgusting.

The seeds of this renewing process that modernism initiated are bountifully to be found in the novelistic creations. Thus, the modernist novel cannot be reduced to a single aesthetic formula, given that it encloses a conglomerate of artistic influences: romantic, symbolist, Parnassian, impressionist, psychologist, realist, and naturalist. Nonetheless, what is worth highlighting is the interest it takes in the inner world of the characters and the approach of existential issues; equally, it definitively distances itself from the typical structures of the atmosphere novel prevailing at that time, and it is making way for the novel of figures, which implies a higher degree of introspection.

Undoubtedly, the modernist novel contributed to the creation of a new kind of literary genealogy which was clearly breaking with the traditional models; this was also due to a series of innovations related to several marks of narrativity: narrator, space, time and character. These

¹¹ Paul Alexandru Georgescu, *Literatura hispano-americană în lumină sistemică*, Craiova: Scrisul românesc, 1969, p. 14 (our translation).

original elements can also be identified in the novels from the first half of the twentieth century that analyze dictatorship and the dictator figure. The first of them is the *omniscient narrator*-type figure, with an all-encompassing look and a pluriperspectivistic approach, an entity that controls every movement of his/her characters and that has the ability to freely penetrate into their minds. But this narratorial innovation represents only a first step in the evolution towards a narrator who makes use of his/her omniscience to turn him/herself into an investigator of the various levels of human consciousness, as well as of the temporal three-dimensionality of characters: it is the total narrator, an unmistakable landmark of Hispanic American postmodernist novel. Whereas in the nineteenth century novel the narrator overtly declares his/her omniscience, assuming the various roles of guide, psychologist or sociologist of the depicted reality, in the novel of the first decades of the twentieth century, the narrator presides over a literary universe which no longer appears to be crystallized in a causal or systematic manner, but rather, on the contrary, it is described as an inconsistent and ambiguous world.

Omniscience is in this case elliptical, restrained, preferring a kind of presentation where the action is *shown* rather than *told* and using short dialogues introduced “in the style of stage directions”¹². Another important feature of the omniscient narrator is the “Brechtian distancing” in relation to the matter narrated, which allows him/her the construction of a satirical ironic vision upon the characters. The means this perspective recurrently employs, such as caricature, animalization of characters or their conversion into puppets, fall into the tradition of the grotesque cultivated by Goya and Quevedo. Simultaneously, the narrator emphasizes the aesthetic function of his/her omniscience artistically elaborating the narrative substance through the appeal to contemporary art (cinema, cubist painting): hence, the visual surpasses the discursive, and the novel appears like a mosaic or a succession of juxtaposed paintings, whose effect is to give prominence to fragmentarism and its metonymic value.

In the modernist-type novels that address the theme of dictatorship and the dictator, the objective historicity is dissolved and the action takes place within a *time* and a *space* that cannot be associated with specific real situations. Generalizing the spatio-temporal coordinates between which the character evolves has as main purpose to transform the dictator into a potentiality from any place and any time. Most often, he leads an imaginary nation over an

¹² Pedro Salinas, *Literatura española del siglo XX*, México: Antigua Librería Robredo, 1949, pp. 115-122, quoted in Bernardo Subercaseaux, “*Tirano Banderas* en la narrativa hispanoamericana (La novela del dictador, 1926-1976)”, in: *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, n° 359, 1980, p. 326, <http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/cuadernos-hispanoamericanos--25/> (Last accessed: 22/11/2015).

undefined period of time between the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The action of the novel is therefore placed in an invented space which integrates and synchronizes a diversity of geographical, biological (flora and fauna), anthropological, and linguistic elements, considered as representative in terms of synthesis for the Hispanic American world. This generic framework, whose ambiguity and vagueness constitute its main features, is composed by articulating several micro-spaces among which urban ones are in the spotlight. Unlike the traditional novel that favors the linearity of time and space, the modernist novel stands out through the combinatorial game of temporal and spatial superpositions which help recreate a fictional world where fragmentation and rupture are predominating. The rapid transition from one scene to another and the almost imperceptible gliding between the analeptic and the proleptic, accompanied by pinpoint interventions of the present, are melding with the indeterminate expansion of timeline, the extreme temporal compression and the evential simultaneity or overlapping.

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