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Note/Nota

More about Modernism in Spanish America

Donald L. Shaw

University of Virginia

Two approaches to Modernism (in the Anglo-Saxon sense, to be carefully distinguished from *modernismo* either in Spanish America or Brazil) coexist, almost independently of one another. The first might be called the traditional or literary critical approach which is typified by my article "When was Modernism in Spanish America?" in 2002. This approach is founded on a curious paradox. While critics are currently involved in a lemming rush to label recent texts by Spanish American authors Postmodernist, lest

their national literatures be thought old fashioned, surprisingly little has been published on Modernism as a strictly literary phenomenon in Spanish America,

The crux of the problem here concerns the "Boom" in Spanish American fiction, which gathered speed after 1950, peaked in 1967 with Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and ran out of steam around 1975. The critical question remains, from our point of view: were the Boom writers (and their great predecessor, Borges) Modernists or did the Boom evolve in a Postmodernist direction, and if so, after which approximate date? The evidence in connection with this approach is, of course, to be found in the most representative texts, and the questions which some critics ask about them are naturally borrowed from Modernist criticism in Europe and North America. Partly, these questions concern thematics, but to a very great extent they concern literary technique. Most colleagues and scholars would probably agree that the three basic issues are connected with first: the Modernist reaction against old-style realism; second: the degree to which literature is still held to represent an alternative form of cognition to that of rationalism or spiritual insight (or whatever) and thus is still able to perform a truth-telling function: and third—more debatably—a change of outlook on the human condition. Thus critics like myself tend to scrutinize relevant texts to calibrate the degree of confidence which their authors show in their insight, and to analyze the different kinds of innovation which characterize the individual works as literary artifacts. Ideally this would allow us to draw a line at some point (perhaps late in the Boom) and suggest that at that point there occurred a crisis of confidence in the truth telling function of literary works, along with other features of Postmodernism, and that an Intensification took place with

respect to innovations in literary technique. Characteristic at this point is Raymond Williams's book *The Postmodern Novel in Latin America*, which embraces precisely that kind of attempt to differentiate between Modernism and Postmodernism in Latin American Fiction. It is, of course, fiction around which most of the debate swirls, although Vanguardist poetry is also highly relevant. In terms of the literary critical approach, it can be argued that Spanish American fiction began to acquire Modernist characteristics in the last half of the 1920s. The kind of names we cite in this connection are, for instance, Pedro Prado, Jaime Torres Bodet, Macedonio Fernandez, Roberto Arlt. Felisberto Hernandez, María Luisa Bombal among many others, and it could be argued that the writings about fiction of Eduardo Mallea and Jaime Tones Bodet clearly reflect a Modernist outlook. The above are not normally recognized as first rank writers. One reason is that their work was somewhat derivative from European models and was normally urban-orientated and cosmopolitan in attitude. A second reason is that this was the heyday of the Regionalist Novel in Spanish America, which exalted *americanismo* and tended to exploit the great unknown interior of the Continent. It was less concerned with the human condition and more concerned with the specific condition of Latin American men and women in the jungles and mountains, on the great plains and on the rivers and sometimes involved in revolutionary or insurrectionary activities. This regionalism is what we still chiefly study. It has overshadowed the more clearly Modernist tendency in fiction and continued to do so until the arrival of the Nobel Laureate Miguel Angel Asturias, along with Ernesto Sábato and above all Borges in the 1940s. Once they appeared we can see the *Boom* on the horizon and begin to think of at least the early part of

this latter movement as representative of High Modernism.

Probably the chief difficulty with the literary critical approach to the problems of the definition and chronology of Modernism in Spanish America is that of disentangling it from the concept of Vanguardism. It is clear that the two concepts, while overlapping, are not the same. But if we glance at Vicky Unruh's book *Latin American Vanguardism* we can appreciate the problem: many of the authors mentioned would figure as Modernist authors. Similarly Pérez Firmat's *Idle Fictions* refers to the "Vanguard Novel" rather than the Modernist novel, whereas Coonrod Martínez regards the Spanish American Innovative Novel" of the 1920s, with authors such as Arqueles Vela, Pablo Palacio, Martín Adán and Roberto Arlt, as Modernist. My own view, for what it is worth, is that we might be well advised to regard Vanguardism as part of early Modernism, characterized essentially by technical experimentation, especially in poetry. But the major shortcoming of Unruh's otherwise illuminating book is that she does not take into consideration the over-arching world-view of the period, which contradicts the euphoria typical of many, if not all, Vanguardist manifestos (Shaw, 2004). It seems unwise to overlook, for example, the fact that Jorge Carrera Andrade, a major Vanguardist poet, could state categorically as late as 1973, that "la angustia existencial es el común denominador de los poemas que se escriben desde 1940 hasta nuestros días" (*Reflexiones*, 81). The generalization may be too broad; but that Carrera Andrade could make it at all is highly significant. In any case it is endorsed by other major figures such as Yurkievich (277) and Cobo Borda (54) who recognize that the malaise in question goes back to *modernismo*. My contention therefore is that this is the wider context in which we have to situate Modernism in Spanish America. I should argue that it embraces the period in

which writers generally accepted the view that the creative imagination was in some sense cognitive and that literature had a truth-telling function, chiefly in connection with the human condition. When that confidence declined, we move from Modernism to Postmodernism. This of course is not an original contention.

More recently, however, chiefly after 1990, a quite different approach to Modernism in Latin America has emerged, which might be called Cultural. It concerns itself not with the evolution of literary forms and techniques but with what Claudia Ferman calls "the processes of the transnationalization of economic and cultural production" (vii) as well as "questions of identity" (viii). This approach is alleged to require the formulation of new theoretical concepts, concerned with issues such as hybridity, nomadism, cultural cannibalism and transvestism. Its chief smuggled-in assumption, which accounts for its popularity in certain quarters, is that the old distinction between "central" or "metropolitan" cultures and "peripheral" ones (i.e.—between First and Third World cultures) is obsolete and must be abandoned. Hence Ferman's assertion that "Cultural products are neither 'central' nor 'peripheral'" (ix). The cultural approach to Modernism in Latin America, that is, is deeply concerned with the beginnings of a challenge to the concept of cultural dependency and with the early elaboration of what Nelly Richard (in Furman) calls "strategies of resistance to and questioning of the core countries' centralizations" (3). The most recent and relevant book on this side of the issue is Fernando Rosenberg's *The Avant-Garde and Geopolitics in Latin America* (2006). All critical movements have an openly proclaimed or hidden agenda. It is important in this case to recognize that the Cultural approach to Latin American Modernism has a very clear ideological thrust.

We are faced, therefore, with an odd situation. One the one

hand we have the exciting possibility of formulating a literary critical body of work on Modernism in the Anglo-Saxon sense in Latin America. This would deal, as in Spain, with the question of whether we can reinterpret *modernismo*, the avant-garde and some or all of Boom fiction (and its equivalent in Brazil) as containing elements of Modernism as we now understand it in Europe (especially Britain) and the United States. This would involve asking different questions of the relevant texts than the ones hitherto asked. The paradigm has been set, to some extent, by Mary Lee Bretz's *Encounters Across Borders* (2001). Bretz attempts to do for Spanish literature from the end of the nineteenth century to about 1925 what we may regard ourselves as challenged to do for a rather longer period in Latin America. It must be reiterated, however, that no such critical re-exploration of relevant Latin American literature from this new standpoint currently exists. We do not know how to periodize the issue; we do not know in any detail who the most relevant authors might be, or which texts to point to; we do not know at all clearly which are the new questions to be asked. But the issue remains: how can we study Postmodernism in Latin America when there is no consensus about Modernism there and apparently little interest in achieving one?

Why might this be the case? One answer might be that such a purely literary critical approach has been pre-empted by what Rosenberg calls "the desire for a politically situated reading" (2005, 77) of Modernism. This would relate the period in question and its literary manifestations not so much to parallel manifestations by literary figures in Europe and the USA, as to the idea of modernity itself, seen in geopolitical terms. Instead of a literary approach we see here something much more like a socio-historic approach. In other words, it is an approach which is not so much interested in any given text

as a literary artifact which reveals affinities with other contemporary literary artifacts. Rather this approach concerns itself with the conditions of "peripheral modernity" in which any given text is produced, the forces that legitimized the culture which it represents and the structures of power and knowledge surrounding its emergence, together with its relationship to an autonomous continental identity.

The key to understanding this approach is the notion that the starting point for a reconsideration of Modernism In Latin America must be geopolitical and not, as hitherto, based on "colonialist" postulates about European influence. The difficulty, however, is to explain (much less define) the relevance of the geopolitical to literature in the early part of the twentieth century. It is comparatively easy to relate certain aspects of Modernism in Latin America to (usually prior) cognate aspect of the Movement in Europe and to some extent in North America. We possess a clearly recognizable paradigm in the outward spread of Renaissance, Baroque, Neo-Classical and Romantic models from the center" to "the periphery" in earlier cultural periods. It is not immediately obvious that Modernism should be viewed in a radically different light. This however is the assumption that the new pattern of criticism starting in the 1990s attempts to subvert. The grounds for this subversion have to do with an alleged geopolitical shift after World War I, resulting in the emergence, for the first time, of what Rosenberg calls "a world-system of attribution of cultural value and meaning"(2006, 5). The new, it is suggested, has to be seen spatially and not temporally.

Such a new approach to Modernism in Latin America clearly opens new avenues of understanding of the movement. Used correctively alongside the older approach (despite the fact that at first sight it seems to contradict it) it offsets, as it is designed to do,

an excessively euro-centered and academic critical approach. But it exhibits major shortcomings. At the present time it is long on theory but short on specific textual references. Perhaps more importantly it is, by its very nature, content criticism in a new guise. It can throw little light on those aspects of evolving literary technique which hitherto have been regarded as important areas of study. They illustrate a basic shift, as we all know, from reassuring metaphors of an intelligible reality, as the deep theme of literary works, to disturbing metaphors of the opposite. In effect, it represents the latest phase of the struggle in Latin American criticism between those (chiefly Latin American) critics who wish to emphasize 'specificity' (to Latin America), and especially to social, historical and political factors affecting cultural production there. and those other critics who begin from the idea of a greater 'cosmopolitanism' in modern Latin American writing. The root question is whether the characteristics which we tend to attribute to Modernism in Latin America (whichever they are) are essentially connected to social (and possibly geopolitical) factors, or whether they are in the last analysis connected to a change (for the worse) in our view of the human condition.

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