

A Postmodern Look at Modernism: A Review Article of Books by Pera and López on Modernista Writers in Hispanic Literature

Richard A. Cardwell
University of Nottingham

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Richard A. CARDWELL

A Postmodern Look at Modernism: A Review Article of Books by Pera and López on Modernista Writers in Hispanic Literature

The label modernista has, until recently, been used to describe a reduced group of finisecular writers, both Spanish and Latin American of the period 1885-1910, who devoted themselves to the establishing of a displaced Theology of Art (the religion of beauty) and of a style appropriate to its expression. The modernistas were perceived to pursue, through a consciously artificial language and exotic and cosmopolitan themes and motifs, the realisation of their dreams of the Ideal and the evocation of worlds distant in time and in space. They were also circumscribed, from the outset in the fin de siglo and, later, in the literary histories of the Hispanic Academy (and thus, in universities, colleges and schools) by a specific discourse which, far from being aesthetic or literary, employed the powerful discourses of medicine, determinism, and evolutionism to create an image of the modernistas as degenerate, *enfermizos*, *neuróticos*, etc. and, in a crude use of sexual and nationalist binary formations, to label them as *femeninos* (as against masculine and vigorous) and cosmopolitan (as against patriotic). They were seen to lack seriousness while other writers of the period were seen as oráculos.

Yet, over recent decades, the discursive hegemonies and misrepresentations of these writers have been challenged to demonstrate that the modernistas on both sides of the Atlantic were much more than decadent escapists and that they were as much -- possibly more -- engaged with the real social, political and cultural world in which they lived as their more conservative contemporaries. That is, they were not only concerned with Art and the creation of Beauty but with the realities of their age and questions of identity, origins, and civic responsibilities. In part the revision in attitudes in the academy began with the literary reappraisal of central figures (Darío, Martí, Machado, Valle-Inclán, etc.), by the publication of bibliographies of newspaper articles, by an assessment of minor figures, and an exploration of the relationship of writer and society in the fin de siglo. Scholars began to know more about the modernista writers within a social, political, and literary context rather than through their works alone. But it is even more recently that these new assessments and new materials have been submitted to more radical critical techniques with the most interesting results.

Since the post-structuralist revolution in the 1960s, given huge weight by the foundational conference in Johns Hopkins University in the autumn of 1966, the employment of critical theory in literary history has become fashionable, first in the academy of English Studies and, later, in Hispanic Studies. Initially, the latter was reluctant to employ the new "theologies," but by the late 1980s and early 1990s, a post-structuralist approach, based on the work of Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Baudrillard, Deleuze, Barthes, Bloom, etc., on the work of feminist critics (Irigaray, Kristeva), and comparativist scholars (Remak, Even-Zohar, Bhaba) has become fashionable and, in some corners of the Anglo-Saxon Hispanic Academy, *de rigueur*.

Two recent studies have radicalised the way in which we read the modernista world vision: Dolores Romero López's *Una relectura del "fin de siglo" en el marco de la literatura comparada: Teoría y praxis* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1998) and Cristóbal Pera's *Modernistas en París. El mito de París en la prosa modernista hispanoamericana* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1997). Pera, whose approach is shaped initially by the pioneering work of Rama, Rodríguez Monegal, Paz, and others, chooses to employ the notion of "discourses" from Foucault's *L'Archéologie du savoir* (1969) to consider the way in which the cultural capital, Paris, is evoked in the prose of a group of Latin American modernistas. Dolores Romero López adopts a post-structuralist comparative approach to a number of finisecular Spanish writers and, at the same time, offers her own critical model for comparative study, *teoría y praxis*. Rather than follow rather dated "influence-based" models for comparison, Romero offers a bolder post-structuralist methodology. She proposes, and very successfully accomplishes, a "revisión de los objetivos específicos de dicha disciplina y de su aplicación al ámbito modernista" (10). Chapters two to seven, therefore, form the ground for the practical exposition of Romero's reformulated comparative theories "para tratar de asentar en la diversidad compartida esta relectura sobre el modernismo hispánico" (10).

The object of Pera's study is narrower than the introductory "Prólogo" (by Aníbal González) suggests and narrower than Romero's study. Nevertheless, Pera is able to raise a whole range of issues which, hitherto, have rarely been mooted in modernista criticism. "El objeto de este trabajo," Pera writes, "consiste en perseguir la imagen de una ciudad, París, a través de la prosa hispanoamericana. No pretendo explorar la ciudad física, empírica, sino la imagen percibida, la imagen literaria de una ciudad que llegó a convertirse en un mito" (13-14). He dissects this myth through a Foucaultian analysis of the discourses that are created, through textual accounts, images, metaphors, etc., to lay bare the contours of "lo que se podría llamar ciudad literaria" (15). The writers whose discourses are analysed are Sarmiento, Gómez Carrillo, Silva, Quiroga, Güiraldes, and Rivera (the last three compressed into a single chapter). Through their literary visions of Paris, Pera follows changing moods and perspectives over a period of fifty odd years and charts how the mesmerising image of Paris emerges as a mapa textual rather than a real topography. From the early visits of Sarmiento, where Paris offers a model for a new society and an escape from the realities at home, Paris becomes the source point for a sought-for cultural (European) identity. Inevitably, with the years, that mesmeric effect wears off setting up a mood of disenchantment and a dialectical engagement with another myth: nature and the natural, giving birth to the major preoccupation of the Latin American novel after 1910. Thus the writer is confronted with the questions of self- and national identity. The search for European roots and models by the newly-founded nations leads to the recognition that the writer is poised between two cultures: the old and the new, the myth and the reality. Thus the psychological bonds are slowly broken; Paris is seen as artificial, degenerate and without identity whereas Latin America offers itself as natural, vigorous and a place of origins.

A figure who appears in both studies is Gómez Carrillo whose vision of Paris (Pera) and the Orient (Romero) is fundamentally the same, that of the flâneur whose gaze takes in both the boutique and the bibelot as much as the colourful and exotic world of Japan. In essence, Gómez Carrillo is like the great Exhibition of Paris itself; he, too, offers a window on the world. One lacuna in both studies is the "gaze" of Rubén Darío. The Nicaraguan poet appears in both studies, of course, but, as a recent fully annotated reprint of 1902's *La caravana pasa. Libro primero* (2000) demonstrates, Darío's articles for the Buenos Aires *La Nación* offer an inclusive, incisive, vivid and informed picture of *fin de siglo* Paris, from the Great Exhibition to low-life *boîtes* as well as articulating the concerns of a generation of de-centred writers. Darío's "gaze" and his knowledge of and engagement with the most progressive French writers of the day would seem to be a *sine qua non* in either of these studies.

Romero's study is much wider in scope. As the title suggests, her study is a re-reading, that is, a critical review and revision, of work on the Spanish *fin de siglo* since the 1970s from the point of view of a comparativist approach. Romero argues that Spanish modernismo forms part of a larger international movement rooted in German Romanticism and European Symbolism. As such, her work offers both a contrast and a complement to *Modernistas en París*. Romero revisits the various interpretations of modernismo over the last twenty five years but takes a wider, international view of its impact "para incidir, una vez más, en el hecho de que la interpretación del fenómeno modernista no debiera prescindir de los acontecimientos, fuentes e influencias de la cultura universal contemporánea que asientan la base de su actual coetaneidad" (9-10). Pera's analysis through "Foucaultian" discourses of a ciudad literaria and a mapa textual and Romero's "revisión de los objetos específicos de dicha disciplina (post-structuralist comparative theory) y de su aplicación al ámbito modernista" thus form a new and exciting critical and analytical panorama of modernista concerns.

In her Introduction and first chapter, Romero offers a critique of past and present practice in modernista studies. A survey and exhaustive list of "influence" studies clarifies a number of problems with comparative pairings as well as illuminating the way in which finisecular writers related and reacted to one another. At the same time, in the second part of her chapter one, she offers an extraordinarily lucid definition of current comparative literary practice. From this theoretically informed basis Romero elaborates and applies her own practical model to a series of problematical areas. She chooses to examine authors and texts generally considered as marginal

to the canonical list of Spanish modernismo and, traces the impact of Symbolist practice through to a living poet, Trapiello, to underline the persistence and survival of Symbolist practice, emphasising at the same time, the presence of intertextuality as a theory of cultural formation. She also embraces the problem of marginal cultures in the *fin de siglo* (Galician and Catalan) that form a part of the modernista experiment. In so doing Romero presents a far more complex scenario than is suggested in literary histories. The same is true of her chapter two where Francis Jammes and the Krausist-influenced writers (Jiménez, Pérez de Ayala, and Unamuno) are studied together and of chapter five where lexical similarities between French and Spanish Symbolism conceal very real cultural differences. In chapter six she places Gómez Carrillo, Loti, and Kipling within the post-structuralist context of "Otherness" to lay bare the conscious and subconscious Western ideologies which permeate and inform the finisecular view of the Orient and modernista exoticism.

Both studies, from their distinct but complementary points of view, combine a keen critical mind with a well-digested and informed theoretical model. Both break the mould of established approaches to the modernista movement in that they concern themselves as much with canonical as with marginal figures. Both demonstrate the instabilities, the psychological traces and supplements of modernista discourses, the constantly shifting, unconscious, cultural and ideological forces at work in literary practice to offer the reader a challenging and illuminating perspective on a literary movement which has been, until recently, seen as monolithic, limited, over-shadowed by European rivals and, as Díaz-Plaja put it in 1951, a *Cenicientas*.

Reviewer's Profile: Richard A. Cardwell holds the Chair of Modern Spanish Literature at the University of Nottingham. His main field of study is the literatures of Spain in the period 1800-1936 with special interest in the *fin de siglo*. He lectures widely in Europe and the Americas and has published many papers and books on Romanticism, modernismo, and the Generation of 1926. Presently he is writing a study of the impact of the medical sciences on the Spanish *fin de siglo* and is editor of the Byron volume in the *Reception of British Authors* series of the British Academy (Athlone Press, forthcoming in 2003). E-mail: <richard.cardwell@nottingham.ac.uk>.