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CROSSING BOUNDARIES

The Search for a New Discourse

NEW VENTURES

Contemporary (re)readings of modernism's texts as well as the examination of its principal writers' theoretical enunciations will substantiate our affirmation that among the Latin American modernists there existed a major interest in discovering and developing creative ties between literary art and the practices of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century painting and sculpture. From 1875 forward, Latin American writers were attracted to the unprecedented succession of innovations in pictorial and graphic arts, both European and Oriental.¹ Photography was invented in 1839, and Western writers, including those in Latin America, were immediately drawn to the creative possibilities of the new medium; their work also suffered the influence of the transition in Europe from academic painting to the art of the Pre-Raphaelites, impressionists, and later to that of the expressionists. Modernists in Latin America became obsessed with the notion of innovative visualizations, whether with the human eye or that of the camera. What resulted were aesthetic and stylistic experiments that created a new universe of textualizations based upon the "gaze."² Writers began to see the world as a picture; they set about writing with the lines and colors of canvases, sculpting statuesque lines, or re-creating with words what they had seen in art museums, reproductions, or photographs of contemporary plastic arts. In addition, the sound of music was subjected to a process of visualization and then transformed into vignettes—impressionistic or expressionistic in quality—and endowed with sensuous images, colors, and lines. However, "what distinguished the modernist literary

response from its predecessors stems from a crisis of belief in the continuity between seeing and knowing, and a commensurate cognizance of the subjective mediations of embodied visuality” (Jacobs, 19).

Writers internalized the world in order to perceive it more fully, understand its hidden nature—a generational undertaking that led to the construction of “alternative” realities and to the exploration of the nature of the Other. Painters posited the reverse, that is, they conceived of their art as a form of writing. Picasso, for example, considered that his prints constituted a form of writing. His lithographs and drypoints were for him a form of “writing fiction.”³ For Martí visualization preceded the act of writing: “I need to see beforehand—he wrote—what I intend to write” (Necesito ver antes lo que he de escribir) (1936–1953, 52: 128). And in his first volume of poetry (*Ismaelillo*, 1882), dedicated to his absent young son, he wrote in the prologue: “I have *Painted* you exactly as you appeared before my eyes. Whenever I’ve ceased *seeing* your shape, I’ve stopped *painting* you” (16: 17; emphasis mine). In this same volume he dreams “with . . . eyes / open and always, by day / . . . always I *see*, floating, / a child, who calls to me!” (“Waking dream,” 2002, 52; emphasis mine). On the one hand this volume of poetry proposes a revolutionary form of writing in its use of visual techniques, chromatics, and inventive metaphors, while on the other it preserves and retextualizes traditional Hispanic meters (pentasyllables, hexasyllables, and heptasyllables), demonstrating the fundamental nature of modernism’s hybridity, a discursive quality described in the introduction.

Ismaelillo strikes a counterdiscursive note in the development of modernism.⁴ The traditional “eye” or “gaze” of the poet deconstructs “rational” spatiality; in its place a subjective universe is substituted, one that first has been internalized and subsequently recast much as European expressionist painters re-visioned material reality and then externalized their emotional reaction to it in the form of a concrete but wholly individually perceived perspective and field of vision.⁵ In Martí’s poems traditional spatiality is absent; space is reorganized, landscapes become *inscapes*: “ *You float over everything! / Son of my soul!*” (2002, 54, emphasis mine); “. . . red plumes move / Internal birds” (“Fragrant Arms,” 16: 23); “From my dreams I drop down, / They disappear flying” (“Mischievous Muse,” 16: 27); or “Minute eagles / Cover the air: / They are ideas, that rise, / Their prisons shattered!” (“Mischievous Muse,” 16: 29)—all of these are fragments of lines that flow throughout this revolutionary book of poetry. Chaos—born of the structures and contradictions of modernity in its initial phases—invades and

pervades the aesthetic space of *Ismaelillo*, a volume published in New York shortly after the poet's arrival there in 1880. Its tone reflects Martí's consternation at the pace of a modernized culture so different from the slower dynamics of life in the nations where the poet had lived or visited—Cuba, Mexico, Guatemala, Venezuela, Spain. He is fascinated, amazed, energized by what he sees and hears, but at the same time he is terrified by his gaze of life in New York City and along the Eastern seaboard, where he traveled by rail and ferry to organize the Cuban Revolution among Cuban émigré groups and tobacco workers. His first words in the introduction are: "My son: Frightened by everything, I take refuge in you. I have faith in human improvement, future existence, in the utility of virtue, and in you" (Hijo: Espantado de todo, me refugio en ti. Tengo fe en el mejoramiento humano, en la vida futura, en la utilidad de la virtud, y en ti) (16: 17).

Martí is not the only modernist who developed a frenetic interpretation of the incipient modern world and its attendant sense of loneliness and isolation that foreshadows the advent of twentieth-century nihilism and existentialism. Thrown into the marketplace of the early stages of American capitalism, writers in Latin America—including those who had never visited the United States—suffered a sense of displacement and angst. To deal with the loss of self generated by the Age of Modernity, writers like Martí focused their gaze inward in order to find the strength to overturn the fortunes of the world, cope with their social isolation, and attempt to redefine their identity:

Man's first task [wrote Martí] is to reconquer himself. It is urgent that men be returned to themselves and extricated from the bad government of convention that suffocates or poisons their sentiments, accelerates the awakening of their senses, and overtaxes their intelligence with a pernicious, alien, cold, and false material wealth. Only what is genuine is fruitful. Only what is direct is powerful. What another bequeaths us is like a warmed-over meal. *It is up to each man to reconstruct life, and no sooner does he look inside himself than he reconstructs it.* (Prologue to "Poem of Niagara," 2002, 49; emphasis mine)

In the process of this reconstruction, visuality is a constant. It also dominates Martí's last volume of poetry, *Versos sencillos* (Simple verses), in which the poet moves about, unfettered in space, and links visions of his poetic discourse with that of all of the arts, with all the sites of nature:

I come from all places
 And to all places go:
I am art among the arts
And mountains among mountains. (2002, 273; emphasis mine)

In discussing the primacy of the visual in modernist literature, Martí wrote in 1882 that

[Today] there is no painter who succeeds in coloring the luminous aureoles of virgins with the novelty and transparency of other times. . . . There are no permanent works, because works produced during times of realignment and restructuring [generated by the Age of Modernity] are mutable and turbulent in their very essence: there are no set paths . . .

(No hay pintor que acierte a colorear con la novedad y transparencia de otros tiempos. . . . No hay obra permanente, porque las obras de los tiempos de reenquiciamiento y remolde son por esencia mudables e inquietas; no hay caminos constantes . . .)
 (1963–1978, 7: 225)

The rejection of established norms, styles, and schools of writing gave way to an age of experimentation, to the introduction of what was later—in the twentieth century—characterized as vanguard literature but which had its roots in the modernists' early experiments. The colors of the artist's palette became a norm in the construction of literary texts. The influence of the French Parnassians was major in this endeavor, especially their interest in the introduction of plastic values in prose and poetry, in the invention of verbalizations capable of creating line and form in the manner of the painterly or sculptural arts. Texts such as Théophile Gautier's *Symphonie en blanc majeur* (1852) inspired similar creations in Latin America. Baudelaire's sonnet "Correspondances" (1857) followed with its concept of synesthesia—that is the intimate relationship the French poet perceived between sound and color. Other French writers proposed similar or even more daring notions: Rimbaud's "Voyelles" (1871) and René Ghil's *Traité du verbe* (1886–1888) linked visual perception to music and chromatics. These experiments prompted the Latin American writers to extend their interest in the aesthetics of color to visualizations produced by or connected to sounds. The fusion of the two senses resulted in the expression of new intel-

lectual or emotional realities, new discursive ventures that enriched the modernist's verbal palette. In these new departures Martí was a trailblazer: as early as 1881, clearly inspired by both Ghil and Rimbaud,⁶ he wrote:

Between colors and sound there is a significant relationship. The cornet produces yellow sounds; the flute usually has blue and orange sounds; the bassoon and violin give off chestnut and Prussian blue sounds, and silence, which is the absence of sound, is black. White is the sound of the oboe.

(Entre los colores y los sonidos hay una gran relación. El cornetín de pistón produce sonidos amarillos; la flauta suele tener sonidos azules y anaranjados; el fagot y el violín dan sonidos de color de castaña y azul de Prusia, y el silencio, que es la ausencia de los sonidos el color negro. El blanco lo produce el oboe.) (1963–1973, 23: 125)

Other modernists focused their attention on the symbolic meaning of a single color. In his poem “De blanco” (On white), Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, through the medium of metaphors, evoked suggestive meanings of the color white:

What is whiter than a candid lily?
 What is more pure than a mystic candle?
 What is whiter than a tender orange blossom?
 What more virginal than a light mist?
 What more sacred than the divine altar of a
 Gothic cathedral?

(¿Qué cosa más blanca que cándido lirio?
 ¿Qué cosa más pura que místico cirio?
 ¿Qué cosa más casta que tierno azahar?
 ¿Qué cosa más virgen que leve neblina?
 ¿Qué cosa más santa que el ara divina
 de gótico altar?) (Garfield and Schulman, 46)

Pictorial elements, music, symbolic colorings of an externalized previously internalized expressionistic gaze produced poems such as José Juan Tablada's “Ballad of the Eyes” (“Balada de los Ojos”):

During the minuet, beneath the white lace
 I saw your red heel shine . . .
 Ah, Scarlatti's sonata
 Celebrated your sweet eyes!

.....

Watteau, Boucher, Fragonard, Greuze,⁷
 Each with their flirtatious brush
 Copied roses in your laughter
 And blue lilies in your eyes!

.....

(En el minueto, entre las blondas
 Miré lucir tu talón rojo . . .
 ¡Ah, la sonata de Scarlatti
 que celebró tus dulces ojos!

.....

Watteau, Boucher, Fragonard, Greuze,
 Con su pincel galante todos,
 Copiaron rosas en tus risas
 ¡y azules lirios en tus ojos!) (1971, 192–193)

OLD VENTURES REINVENTED: *UT PICTORA POESIS*⁸

Other modernists in their mind's eye captured visualizations in the form of paintings that they transferred verbally to prose, poems, or prose poems. Ekphrasis⁹ became a favored discursive technique, which writers such as Rubén Darío used with flair in his early seminal modernist volume *Azul . . .* (Blue . . .) (1888), especially in the section entitled “En Chile” (In Chile). Krieger, in establishing the theoretical base for ekphrasis, states that

. . . words cannot have capacity, cannot be capacious because they have literally no space. Ekphrasis involves a desire—since Plato—a romantic quest to attain a pre-fallen language of corporeal presence, using language as we know it to attain the magical transformation. (10)

Darío's painterly interests were related to his interest, shared by almost every Latin American modernist, in expanding the boundaries of lin-

guistic discourse through heretofore untried plastic techniques. The sections of “En Chile” abound in luminous, chromatic expressions that in their time constituted aesthetic transgressions that nevertheless were not entirely original with the modernists.¹⁰

In the fourth section of “En Chile,” “La Virgen de la Paloma,” Darío alludes openly to the idea of painting in relation to literature and notes that he feels certain that in the hands of an accomplished artist this vignette could be a painting of signal artistic value: “I am convinced [he writes in a note,] that *this small ‘watercolor’ if treated by a painter of talent would result in a work of art of signal aesthetic value*” (1992, 129; emphasis mine).¹¹ It is clear from this note that Darío is aware of the technique of ekphrasis as he strives to redefine linguistic representation through the incorporation of new artistic techniques and enunciations. This process of hybrid textual construction is consciously manipulated in what might be termed the *introit* of this section of Darío’s *Azul . . .*, in which the narrator asserts that Ricardo, a lyrical poet, seeks to create impressions, *canvases* he says, but *without brushes, palettes, paper or pencil* (*sin pinceles, sin paleta, sin pincel, sin lapis*) (125). It is more than possible, as Lida suggests, that Darío’s early and constant French readings (53) led the author of *Azul . . .* to experiment with ekphrastic techniques whose optical values, given the form with which Darío endows them, reveal a hybridity characterized by an aesthetic intentionality combined with a political message: Ricardo, the instrument the narrator uses to express what might be termed *enargeia lingüística*,¹² seeks to flee from a commodified environment:

the bustle and restlessness, of the engines and the bales, the monotonous noise of the streetcars and the clatter of the horses with their peal on the cobblestones; the bands of merchants; the daily shouting of the street vendors; the incessant noise and restlessness of this port . . .

(las agitaciones y turbulencias, de las máquinas y de los fardos, del ruido monótono de los tranvías y el chocar de los caballos con su repiqueteo sobre las piedras; del tropel de los comerciantes; del grito de los vendedores de diarios; del incesante bullicio e inacabable hervor de este Puerto . . .) (125)¹³

The flight from the urban scene with its bustling commercial and industrial activity is emblematic of the sense of alienation experienced by the modernists faced with the transformations of economic modernization during

the first stages of capitalism. The writers of this first period living in major cities felt trapped, displaced, and asphyxiated by the new socioeconomic order; many sought the refuge of rural nature, other spaces, or the alternative universes of previous historical ages. Conscious of the changes associated with modernity, Martí, for example, in his analysis of the art forms available to the modern writer, theorized that “the poem [for the new generation] exists in nature” (el poema [está] en la naturaleza) (1963–1978, 7: 229). And Ricardo, Darío’s lyrical poet, echoing Martí’s sentiments, focuses his gaze on the battles and solemnities of nature, and, in a metaphorical statement, envisioned an idealized “beautiful garden, with more roses than azaleas and more violets than roses” (bello jardín, con más rosas que azaleas y más violetas que rosas) (“Acuarela,” 126). In Darío’s bucolic painting that bears the title *Watercolor*—and in which he moves from urban reality to idealized nature—there is, on the one hand, a clear rejection of the materialistic culture of the second half of the nineteenth century and the desire to find an antimodern refuge.¹⁴ And on the other hand, we find a search for the new in the elaboration of a pictorial vanguard aesthetic, a desire to create in fiction what Praz termed, “some of the same formal liberties and absence of conventional justification that prevail in modern pictorial style” (192). Hence the titles of almost all the ekphrastic “vignettes” of “En Chile”: “Watercolor” (twice), “Landscape,” “Portrait,” “A Watteau Painting,” “Still Life,” “Pastel,” “Charcoal.”

Ricardo’s flight from the city to the bucolic garden is as symbolic as the painted landscapes. There is in these “literary canvases” an imaginary geography of heights that constitutes an unmistakable metaphoric affirmation of the continuous search in early modernist letters for transitioning to an ideal Platonic or Pythagorean universe. Ricardo, the inveterate dreamer, the narrator tells us, had reached the highest point of the hill where the movements below could barely be perceived, where there was sun and darkness and where he was thinking of idylls, with all the august cheek of a millionaire poet (1992, 126). In the imagined spatial elements of his vignette, Darío expresses the conflicted dualism of materialism/spiritualism characteristic of the modernist writer’s angst. Martí refers to these very same conflicted feelings through a set of paired images of heights and depths:

There are mountains—he writes—next to abysses, and near infirmities, strength: tenderness and enthusiasm look toward the sky, and we see the poet *not in the depths whose gaze we disdain*, but in the mountain that witnesses our admiration.

(Hay montañas al lado de los abismos, y del lado de los decaimientos, fortalezas: el cariño y el entusiasmo miran siempre al cielo, y nosotros vemos al poeta, *no en el abismo cuyo examen desdeñamos*, sino en la montaña que presencia nuestra admiración.) (1936–1953, 50: 190; emphasis mine)

The modernists searched the horizons for alternatives to the status quo; their longings for release or change were expressed through transgressive, often daring discursive practices. Like Martí, Darío painted with words; he created what Lida has described in his study of Darío's prose as an art of color and lines with an interplay of light and pictorial composition reminiscent of a painter's arrangement of inanimate objects (58). The eye of the writer/painter is evident in "A Watteau Portrait" ("Un retrato de Watteau," 1992, 132–133), a short narrative in which the eighteenth century past is blended with modern times: it is a retextualized portrait in the style of the aristocratic past in which the subject is a contemporary aristocratic Chilean woman decked out for a ball and described by Darío in a style worthy of Watteau's brush: "Dressed and adorned as the great Watteau would have conceived her with his brushes" (*vestida y adornada como el gran Watteau la hubiera concebido con sus pinceles*) (133). In this prose poem Darío employs a variety of descriptive techniques that evidence his conscious desire to surmount the limitations of traditional nineteenth-century verbal practice. The initial scene is theatrical: the narrator opens the curtain to present to the reader the mysteries of the dressing room. Words translate visions; the narrator provides stage directions: "You see the arm of the nymph, her tiny arms . . ." (*Estáis viendo ese brazo de ninfa, esas manos diminutas . . .*) (132); "look," he says, "you see" (*mirad; vese*) (133). Her waist, her skirt, her foot, the red heels of her shoes, are described as in a painting (133). The narrator's gaze conjures up a setting reminiscent of Velázquez's *Las Meninas*: the nymph looks at herself in the mirrors of her dressing room as the eyes of a mythological Diana examine her from the vantage point of her pedestal (133). Darío paints and sculpts the objects of the room:

A statue of Diana, irresistible and nude elevated on her pedestal [examines her]; and a bronze satyr who bears a candelabra among the tendrils of his head laughs at her, and from the handle of a Rouen pitcher of perfumed water, a siren with a curved tail and brilliant silver scales extends her hands and bosom . . .

(Una Diana que se alza irresistible y desnuda sobre su plinto [la contempla]; y le ríe con audacia un sátiro de bronce que sostiene entre los pámpanos de su cabeza un candelabro; y en el ansa de un jarrón de Rouen lleno de agua perfumada, le tiende los brazos y los pechos una sirena con la cola corva y brillante de escamas argentinas . . .) (133)

In “La cabeza” (The head) in lieu of sculptural enunciations color is blended with language as the narrator paints his text. Darío first read Martí’s “luminous” prose during his stay in Chile;¹⁵ and it was Martí who first theorized about the links between inspiration, ocular perception, color, and the art of writing: “Every painting [wrote the Cuban] has the color tones appropriate to it; because there are delicate tones such as pink or gray. . . . Blue requires rapid and vibrant accents, and black dark and spacious” (Cada cuadro lleva las voces del color que le está bien; porque hay voces tenues, que son como el rosado o el gris. . . . Lo azul quiere unos acentos rápidos y vibrantes, y lo negro otros dilatados y oscuros) (1992, 12: 187). In this same line of ekphrastic narration, the narrator of “La cabeza” describes the head of Ricardo, the poet of “En Chile,” as “an orgy of colors and sounds. . . . And the colors, grouped together, were like petals of individual buds mixed together in a tray, or as *the diabolical mix of hues that fill a painter’s palette* . . .” (una orgía de colores y sonidos. . . . Y los colores agrupados, estaban como pétalos de capullos distintos confundidos en una bandeja, o como *la endiablada mezcla de tintas que llena la paleta de un pintor* . . .) (1992, 130–131; emphasis mine).

The experimentation in “Acuarela” (Watercolor) is different. In this vignette Darío creates a “painting transfer”—but the base of his narrative is not a painting he might have viewed in a museum, but rather one that is the product of his imagination that then he endows with colors and lines:

Here’s the painting. In the foreground are the black colors of the carriages that shine and break up the last reflections of the sun; the proud horses with the luster of their harnesses, with the stiff and immobile necks of heraldic beasts . . . and seated in the rear of the carriages like odalisques, erect like queens, the fair women with dreamy eyes, black hair and pale faces . . .

(He aquí el cuadro, En primer término está la negrura de los coches que esplende y quiebra los últimos reflejos solares; los

caballos orgullosos con el brillo de sus arneses, con sus cuellos estirados e inmóviles de brutos heráldicos . . . y en el fondo de los carruajes, reclinadas como odaliscas, erguidas como reinas, las mujeres rubias de los ojos soñadores, las que tienen cabellos negros y rostros pálidos . . .) (1992, 131)

The techniques of the impressionist painters (whose artistic innovations were a major influence in the development of modernist style) are evident in this and other sections of Darío's "En Chile"—especially the contrasts of a palette of light and dark tones. These, however, are not presented in the manner of the "colored prose or poetry" of previous periods. Instead, a full artistic range is employed, or, at the other end of the spectrum, a monochrome of blacks and whites as in "Charcoal" (Carbón):

Suddenly I turned my eyes toward a dark corner. I saw a woman who was praying. *She was dressed in black* covered with a shawl; her highlighted face was severe, sublime, and in the background there was the vague dark outline of a confessional . . . the lights slowly dimmed, and with each moment the darkness of the background increased, and then dazzled; I seemed to see her face illuminated with a white, mysterious light . . .

(De pronto, volví la vista cerca de mí, al lado de un ángulo de *sombra*. Había una mujer que oraba. *Vestía de negro*, envuelta en un manto, su rostro destacaba severo, sublime, teniendo por fondo la vaga oscuridad de un confesionario . . . las luces se iban extinguiendo, y a cada momento aumentaba lo oscuro del fondo, y entonces, por un ofuscamiento, me parecía ver aquella faz iluminarse con una luz blanca y misteriosa . . .) (1992, 134)

And the narrator at that same moment draws the visionary moment to a close by focusing on the figure of the woman who, he confides, "would have made an ideal subject for a charcoal study" (habría sido un tema admirable para un estudio al carbón) (135).

Clearly an image-based program generated this and other Darío texts; the gaze, the passion for "painting with words," lies at the base of the Nicaraguan's ekphrastic discourse. If we turn to Darío's own explanation of the nature of his writing in his *History of My Books* (*Historia de mis libros*), a

text in which he reflects upon the “novelties” of *Azul* . . . , we read that there was a conscious intent to supersede the clichés of Spanish Golden Age writing by taking inspiration from French authors, especially the symbolists in whose works he found new adjectival patterns, new syntactic molds, and a certain aristocratic verbal quality (1992, 195–196). But it is significant to point out that not only in the case of Darío, but also in that of other modernists of his generation, verbal experimentation was not simply a question of style pure and simple. Verbal innovations were connected to a need to fathom “the enigma of the universe’s [contemporary] palpitations (200). In short, ekphrasis was not a hollow stylistic venture but was tied to the modernist’s intense religious doubts, the generational angst and tedium that created a need to reorder and redefine the world, and in so doing, relocate the place of modern writers in the new socio-economic structure of the early years of modernity. Darío, in writing about the genesis of “En Chile,” characterized its miniatures as “chromatic sketches that had no antecedents in traditional Hispanic prose” (201).¹⁶

In his autobiographical comments on the genesis of “En Chile,” Darío characterized his prose miniatures as “chromatic essays” (201). And the fact is that the brevity of these narrations, their mosaic quality, the agility of the prose constitute a reflection of a culture with accelerated movement, instability, and constant motion, a culture that produced emotional upsets and frustrations that assaulted and confused the modernists—all of which is apparent in their texts. They abound in stylistic experimentation, including the use of ekphrastic techniques by means of which they hoped to express a host of ideas and concerns without recourse to the outdated modes of writing of previous historical periods. Martí, who was endowed with a profound vision of his present and peered into the future, described all this in his essay “El carácter de la *Revista Venezolana*” (1881):

we live in an age of incubation and renewal, in which having lost the old supports, we grope in search of new ones. . . . An Egyptian sky should not be painted with London fogs; nor the youthful verdure of our valleys with the pale green of Arcadia . . .

(vivimos en una época de incubación y de rebrote, en que perdidos los antiguos quicios, andamos como a tientas en busca de los nuevos. . . . No se ha de pintar cielo de Egipto con brumas de Londres; ni el verdor juvenil de nuestros valles con aquel verde pálido de Arcadia . . .) (1963–1978, 7: 209, 211)

Krieger, writing from another vantage point, finds that the use of ekphrasis throughout history embraces a “desire to overcome the disadvantage of words and of the verbal art as mere arbitrary signs by forcing them to ape the natural signs and the natural-sign art that they cannot turn themselves into” (12). However, Darío and the majority of the Latin American modernists *were* successful in converting signs into temporal and spatial images through the use of plastic, sculptural, and even musical elements. The insistent use of ekphrasis by Darío and Martí reflected the cultural disconnects of their time and expressed the urgency felt by writers of their time to explore alternative universes through the medium of verbal power. The painted verbalizations of ekphrastic enunciations achieved a corporeal substantiality intended to fill the philosophical, social, and cultural voids of the waning decades of the nineteenth century, a void that in the following century was retextualized by vanguard writers and, in our day, by postmodernists.