

Introduction

The Density of Literary History

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Born in 1926 in Montevideo, Uruguay, Ángel Rama, like most public intellectuals in the developing world, wore several hats in his youth: author, editor, critic, translator, publisher, actor. During the 1950s Rama turned his attention toward creative work, producing fiction and writing plays. In 1958, he was put in charge of the literary section of *Marcha*, a political weekly newspaper, and he began his transition into one of the most important Latin American intellectuals of the twentieth century. It was in the pages of this newspaper that Rama began to introduce to the South American public of that region the work of little-known contemporary authors such as Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Alejo Carpentier, and other writers who would go on to achieve a commercial and critical success unprecedented in the history of Latin American letters. As a literary critic, Rama began to develop a sociological approach during the 1960s, influenced by the Frankfurt School and Walter Benjamin. During this period, Rama was inspired by the Cuban Revolution and the idea of creating a different socialist society, independent of the interference from both the Soviet Union and the United States, but by the early 1970s, when the Soviet influence on the Caribbean Island increased, he cut ties with the Revolution. His unique interpretations of Latin American literary history, in particular his readings of important literary movements or periods—for example, modernismo, gauchesque poetry, the literature of the Mexican Revolution—increased

his visibility. In 1973, a military coup d'état in Uruguay forced him into exile in Venezuela where he worked for several years and started Biblioteca Ayacucho, an ambitious editorial project to publish scholarly editions of classical Latin American texts. In 1980, he moved to the US, but his petition for a resident visa was denied because he had been classified as “communist subversive” early in his career.

The initial reception of Ángel Rama’s work in American academia occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in departments of Hispanic literature that were beginning to mirror the transformation of literary criticism caused by the wave of postmodernist ideas and approaches, and the rise of theory that had been impacting the English literature departments. It was unavoidable that literary critics in the US read Rama looking for “concepts,” “tools,” or “theories” that could be not only applied to other “texts” or cultural objects but also reinterpreted as a contribution to, for lack of a better term, the postmodern discourse and its critique of social constructs. Those reasons perhaps allow us to understand the immense influence Rama’s “theories” of narrative transculturation and of the Latin American *letrado* held for Latin American criticism and other fields associated with Latin American studies at the turn of the century. I use the term theories with quotation marks because the idea that conceptions of culture developed under specific social conditions could be transported to another region and applied to a different situation was very problematic for Rama, as is evident in a few of the essays in this collection. The historical circumstances of his reception explain that most of Rama’s critical work, which cannot be easily operationalized and reused as free-floating “theory” remains understudied and inaccessible in other languages. Logically, the first of his books to be translated into English was *The Lettered City* (in 1996) as it was already having an important impact in the field of Latin American studies in general.¹ The next year “Processes of Transculturation in Latin American Narrative” was published in the *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*.² In this article from 1974, Rama presented for the first time his theory of narrative and it became the basis for his book *Transculturation narrativa en América Latina* (1982). The latter has been translated with the title *Writing Across Cultures*.³

We get an incomplete picture of Rama’s interpretation of the Latin American literary field if we depend only on those two books—not only because he studied a wide variety of topics that are not covered with the theories of transculturation and the *letrados* (as an incredibly prolific writer, Rama’s bibliography surpasses fourteen hundred items⁴) but also because he

was purposely studying those topics from a very limited perspective. For example, in his theory of the letrado, Rama simplifies the history of the intellectual in Latin America to focus only on the relationship of this social group to political power. Likewise, the theory of transculturation studies only a small number of cases of authors from mid-twentieth-century Latin American literature who have successfully, organically, negotiated the modernization process. As I introduce some of the themes related to the essays included in this collection, I am taking the opportunity to show how they add complexity to the view of Rama's work that we get from the materials that were previously available in English, namely *The Lettered City* and *Writing Across Cultures*.

Rama believed that real literary criticism always took place in newspapers and magazines, where it could reach a large audience, and not within the sterile setting of university campuses.⁵ "Criticism and Literature" (1971) is a short essay that Rama wrote for *Sin Nombre*, a literary review in Puerto Rico, one of the places where he worked as a literature professor. While reflecting on the unique situation of the Puerto Rican literary field in which, he says, a double circuit has emerged, one composed of authors who utilized their influence and social capital to receive undeserved recognition for works that are unoriginal or of questionable quality, Rama comments on what he understands is the purpose of literary criticism. His reflections on the many functions of criticism with regard to literature and to a society's decision about which cultural paths it must follow in the future go beyond a simple view of criticism as historical research or as arbiter of taste. While there is a T. S. Elliot-esque feeling when he assigns criticism the task of connecting the present with the past, creating a literary corpus, Rama is also seeking to emphasize that the system created by literary criticism cannot be reduced to aesthetics but depends on evaluating many social options (moral, economic, or religious) affecting the creation of a literary work in a specific historical moment. That would also include "many options that emerge from the cultural demands relevant to present day society." Criticism, then, is not just a passive cultural act—it plays an active role in helping society to "discover itself," which explains Rama's preoccupation with the quality of literary criticism in Latin America. Hence his rejection of structuralism, as he understands that such an approach requires the assumption that one can detach a literary system from a cultural system.

One can also observe in "Criticism and Literature" Rama's belief in the power of literary criticism to organize hierarchically, that is, to create a coherent, organic whole out of disparate elements. This does not mean,

however, that he is arguing for a flattening/simplification of literary history. On the contrary, most of his critique of the literary criticism of his time actually focuses on urging critics to avoid simplistic periodization and recognize the rich complexity of the literature produced in Latin American nations, to take into account the diversity of social groups represented in them.

Ironically, simplistic periodization was one of the problems plaguing the posthumously published *The Lettered City*. As mentioned above, this book analyzes the origin of the Latin American intellectual, or *letrado*, as resulting from a situation of colonization in which the power of the written word—whether through the creation of laws, rules, or maps—seeks to control a non-European reality that must be molded and controlled. However, as the study moves from colonial times to the different stages that come after independence, it becomes evident that the preoccupation of intellectuals is focused on surviving as a group, that is, maintaining the privileges that they obtained from the simple fact that they have access to the written word in a region where the masses have remained illiterate and do not have access to the main means of communication. Unfortunately, this vision of the *letrado* as self-interested, as mainly involved in protecting their connection to a political power that validates their position when faced with new challenges—modernization, increased public literacy, the emergence of new professionals that challenge their supremacy—fails to show Rama’s awareness of the field of forces that Latin American intellectuals had to navigate at each historical juncture.

Early critiques of Rama’s *The Lettered City*, like the one found in Julio Ramos’s *Divergent Modernities*, understandably centered on the problem of periodization created when trying to encompass such a large span of time. Arguing that Rama puts in the same *letrado* group two completely different authors (Sarmiento and Rodó) from the mid- and late nineteenth century “because both were public servants,” Ramos shows that Rama’s periodization “does not take into account the different discursive fields that grounded their respective interventions. In fact, these fields were traversed by different subjects, different modes of authorization.”⁶ No doubt Ramos is correct with respect to the need to establish differences between the literary system (local and regional) in which these writers worked but wrong in suggesting that Rama’s work was not attentive to the overlapping between *letrado* ideologies. In fact, attention to this type of discursive disparity is a trademark of Rama’s criticism. Nothing is more central to his critical practice than his call for Latin American scholars to pay attention to what he used to call

the “density” of literary history. For example, looking at nineteenth-century literature, in “Literature and Social Class” (1976), he argues for the existence of two main layers where works coexist simultaneously but independent from each other. One of them is always supported by important social institutions, the other one is not. In Latin America, he explains, the division into two productions is associated with a series of ideas, among them the tendency to place urban and learned writing on one side and rural life and oral or folkloric art on the other. Each layer is characterized by addressing a specific public through the literary forms they employ. But this simple opposition is complicated when the concept of class is introduced. He gives the example of two mid-nineteenth-century Brazilian writers, born around the same time, writing for the same newspaper, and working with similar themes, who develop two different styles of writing (one cultured, imitating a Romantic style, the other more realistic, cynical, using awkward language) that reflect two different worldviews. “It is not necessary to resort to the biography of both authors to find the causes of these differences,” writes Rama, because their literary choices betray their class affiliation. The same presence of social classes with different worldviews applies to works produced on the other side of the spectrum, directed at rural groups, such as *gauchesque* literature. Given the centrality of “class struggle” for the historical development of the region, for Rama it seems incomprehensible to believe that literary history is not able to show the importance of that separation for classifying Latin American artistic production.

There is no doubt, then, that in *The Lettered City* Rama has chosen to present to us a condensed and flattened version of the history of intellectuals in Latin America, and one need look no further than his reading of Azuela as just another member of the *letrado* group: “Mariano Azuela specialized in critiques of intellectuals, members of a social group which he despised despite belonging to it himself . . . Azuela’s paradigm of intellectuals in the revolution has a long tradition in Latin America and draws on a commonplace of the popular imagination regarding the representatives of the lettered city: an undisguised awe of the intellectual’s capacity to manipulate language, whether in oratory or writing.”⁷ In contrast, the analysis we find in one of the earliest essays included in this collection, “Mariano Azuela: Ambition and Frustration of the Middle Class” (1966), is a masterful study of ideology and political commitment. Rama studies the political situation that leads Azuela to make the decision to openly use his writing to advance a political position, not without first covering the author’s process in deciding to which social group he should adhere. In the process, Rama paints a picture of

the multiple interests at play during the revolutionary period and the positions that intellectuals took, which were far from being homogeneous. As opposed to the simple description that “Azuela despised intellectuals while being one of them,” Rama shows how Azuela’s rejection of the traditional intellectuals affects his approach to literary form. When in *The Underdogs* Azuela creates a literature with testimonial intentions, in which “the things narrated in them are happening and the author is constantly referring to contemporary facts or situations,” he is distancing himself from the dominant forms employed by the literatos at the time. Pointing out Azuela’s portrayals of modernista poets detached from reality, Rama explains how he makes fun of their art for art’s sake credo, criticizes their “escapism,” and ridicules the titles of their works (“Agonies of the Marble,” “I Search Now for the Heights of Serenity”), which appear senseless when contrasted to the reality of the ongoing revolution. Azuela “[not] only caricatures the typical modernist poet who after 1910 becomes a survivor,” explains Rama, “but also the ‘colonialists’ who, right in the middle of the revolutionary period, continue to fantasize about reconstructing long-gone societies.”

It is ironic that the same Ángel Rama who wrote extensively asking Latin American critics to pay more attention to the nuances and discontinuities of literary history, warning others about oversimplifying the field of forces in a literary system, is now often judged by a book that does not display these qualities. In spite of the originality of its thesis, the absence of the type of density and complexity in *The Lettered City* that one expects from Rama’s writings at times makes the best known and most used of his texts in American academia look like an outline, a mere blueprint of a building that was never completed.⁸ In contrast, his earlier work is characterized by the author’s constant, almost obsessive return to topics already studied, rethinking and improving his analysis with each new look. Two of the essays included in this collection are examples of a topic to which he kept trying to find the correct approach. In “Literary System and Social System in Spanish America” (1975), his preoccupation with avoiding “a lineal, progressive literary history lacking in density” that happens when Latin American critics try to impose a prioritization based on Europe’s artistic development leads him to propose the idea of literary sequences or series. Some of these sequences are based only on artistic manifestations whereas the other series will be “non-discursive in nature, but rather technical, economic, social, political, and so on, and they will be found forcefully linked with literary sequences by reason of the structural interdependence of an ensemble.” But the topic behind this research is the problem of mediation, the complex processes

through which social reality manifests itself in the literary text. With the idea of series, Rama seeks to avoid presenting literature as responding directly to economic or social forces. All series are autonomous, but the literary text possesses the capacity to combine other discourses and “return[s] them to society as an indivisible totality.”

He keeps coming back to the idea that language plays an important role in the process that links the literary text to the worldview of a social group represented in an artistic text. In the last essay that Rama wrote, “Literature within an Anthropological Framework” (1984), he was still attempting to discover in the relationship between language and community a solution to the problem of arguing that the text always shows traces of the social context in which it was created. Rama begins by summarizing the importance of the field of anthropology for Latin American literature. He mentions that this discipline’s contributions—for example, the introduction of cultural relativism—have impacted artists in the region, allowing them to evaluate positively regional cultures. But for Rama the most interesting aspect is anthropology’s notion of a “collective production of culture.” Anthropologists, he says, look for this collective expression in arts and languages. This does not mean that individual artists disappeared but that artists worked with collective patterns that carried the values of their community. It allows us to see literary works as “cultural organic expressions, immersed in the complex web of relations.” As a “truncated model of the culture that informs it,” we can read society in the text. Thus, when anthropology analyzes primitive languages trying “to find in language the objectification of a worldview that undergirds the community that uses it,” it is unwittingly advancing the idea that those values and beliefs as well as communal aspirations are part of the literary text, whose raw material is language.

A close relationship between language and worldview is one of the main components of *Writing Across Cultures*, the other one of Rama’s books available in English. The theory developed in it, well-known among Latin Americanists, argues that faced with the influence of modern literature produced in Anglo-European countries, some Latin American authors, concerned with the preservation of regional traditions, respond by looking for local equivalents to modern techniques and structures. The local culture does not die when replaced by the modern, but rather it is updated thanks to the work of the transculturator. Transculturators do not passively accept exterior influences and adapt them. More exactly, their work is the result of a double process of selection. At the same time as they decide which

foreign influences they will accept, they are analyzing their own culture for the purpose of rescuing traditional elements that are compatible with the modernizing forces. They are by no means the first Latin American authors to respond this way, but they appear to be the most successful at the time Rama wrote his book (1982). Rama sees this tendency to find local equivalents at many other moments (with varied levels of success) during the history of twentieth-century Latin American literature, and in each of those moments he discovers that there are also authors who have the opposite reaction, wishing to leave behind the local context and join the “universal” culture. His essay from 1973, “The Latin American Two Avant-Gardes,” is the first place where he suggests organizing literary history around the two major poles of attraction, the foreign or the Latin American literary systems: “For some, the avant-garde [literary work] . . . required readers to apprehend the European literary system from which it took its models as they were consuming it. Two operations of appropriation had to be performed at the same time. . . . I do not think it was clear to [Latin American avant-garde authors] that adopting a European literary system imported with it other cultural elements. . . . [However, there is another group] whose works were created within a Latin American literary system. They drew from its structures and contributions, modifying and adapting them to new realities.” The historical shapes these two positions take logically change according to the forces or issues at play (as well as the players), and understanding which authors Rama includes on one side of the pole or the other, it seems to me, is an important corrective to how his work has been received in the US.⁹ While in American academia his book on narrative transculturation is often mistakenly seen as the summa of his critical work, is actually a study of a particular reaction to the developments within the mid-twentieth-century literary system. The fact that Rama focused on the contemporary period and included popular writers like Gabriel García Márquez and Juan Rulfo has made the book more attractive and controversial, but in a way, this study is no different than the books he dedicated to modernismo or to the gauchesque genre. In each case, Rama focused on a group of writers or a “movement” whose art inclined toward either the European or the Latin American literary system. In the case of transculturators, however, understanding how contemporary developments in technology and in artistic technique have transformed the literary field is important to the origin of Rama’s theory and why he saw it as the “correct” path at that moment.

On the one hand, the question of technology in Rama’s work originates in his readings of critical theory—his writings included here are clearly

at times a response to both Benjamin and Adorno, for example, and in that sense one can understand that they become intertwined with his concerns with literary technique. On the other hand, this is a topic that in a Latin American context cannot be extricated from the peripheral position of these regions in terms of use, consumption, and especially invention of technological machinery, or, in the case of culture, innovations in artistic technique. Rama read Walter Benjamin in Italian and possibly French translations in the mid- to late 1960s, before the German critic's writings were available in Spanish. "Spanish American Literature in the Age of Machines" (1972) is a short essay, written as a reaction to these early readings of Benjamin, specifically the well-known essay on technological reproduction to which Rama's title alludes. Noticing how rapidly technology has changed since the end of WWII, Rama is not interested in questions of how technological reproduction undermines authenticity, as the German critic was, but in what the process of making technologies economically viable for a greater number of people means for literature. For Rama the increased use of reproduction technologies such as film and sound recording has transformed the content of literary works, but not because writers have to compete with machines in replicating reality. Technology, he says, has transformed how authors conduct their research, offering them the means to document the world outside more objectively and to study it. His reflections on art are, however, wrapped in a more general concern about the invasion into the Latin American market of all kinds of "machines." When he wrote this essay in 1972, Rama felt that Latin America, a marginalized region in the world economy, was becoming filled with mechanical objects produced abroad, with a forest of foreign products that block access to reality, and this would result in heterogeneous literary works. About ten years later, when he writes "Narrative Technification" (1981), these concerns have moved to the forefront. During that period, the world economic crisis that took place after the 1973 oil crisis made evident that Latin American efforts to replace imported goods with the import substitution industrialization (ISI) model of development had failed, and this prompted a deeper reflection on the relationship between technology and artistic technique. Rama's essay investigates the idea that techniques are created as a response to social changes in a specific cultural context; they become, like the "machines" in the earlier essay, imported products that invade the Latin American cultural space. A simple application of techniques created for other social formations, imported and applied locally, is likely to result in a failure, in a disharmonious artistic object that reveal a schism between form and content.

Rama traces the different stages of this conflict between local content and a foreign form, from the turn-of-the-century modernistas and their strive for professionalization to a contemporary “internationalization of literary techniques” as they have come to form part of a “common heritage.” But the problem with this perception, Rama will argue time and again, is that techniques, if left unchanged, will bring with them the context in which they originated: “One can also suspect that universal techniques that are adapted to narrative and applied to a Latin American content subtly drive a transformation of this content within equally universal patterns.” At the end of “Narrative Technification,” Rama retakes his ideas about the two avant-gardes and presents transculturation as the appropriate response to the globalization of culture and as the latest step in the history of Latin America’s relationship with literary modernization, but not the only way. Both cosmopolitan writers’ and transculturators’ approaches “are equally valid to sustain artistic production at the highest level” and even those authors who accept the urban world can reconnect “to the origins, to the defenseless zones, to the marginal characters.”

The last characteristic that I want to call attention to in this selection of essays is Rama’s attraction for studying what one could call group behavior in literary history, an idea directly connected to the notion of literary systems mentioned above. Rama began to think about “literary systems” in the 1960s, influenced by the work of Brazilian critic Antônio Candido who in 1957 published *Formação da Literatura Brasileira*. Candido defined a literary system as a group of literary works interconnected through three common elements: a group of authors (more or less conscious of their role), a reading public, and a form of communication among them. The main purpose when thinking of these connections in terms of a “system” is to emphasize not competition (which is not to say that this element was not present) but continuity. In “The Literary System of Gauchesque Poetry” (1977), for example, Rama studies the early national literatures of the River Plate region. On one side, he sees the members of the Literary Salon, whose work, even after independence, continued to consider the Romantic literature produced in Spain as the model of high literature. On the other side, there are those writers looking for a public among the lower classes, writing for gauchos and the rural population. Rama’s essay focuses on gauchesque authors’ awareness of their position in the literary field, the range of topics available to them, and, above all, the public they are seeking to reach and the ideology connected to that audience. Their literary choices, artistic formulas they try, and the different ways to make their works available are aimed at creating a tradition: “They see themselves as members of a

literary movement, declaring themselves followers, refiners, simple disciples, and rarely disagree with past works or authors. In few occasions one can corroborate how literature comes out of literature and in turn engenders literature, in a succession that goes from fathers to sons, from teachers to disciples, and from texts to texts.” While Rama believed that at the end of the nineteenth century writers began to see themselves as individual players within the literary marketplace, he continues to find traces of group behavior in his work on modernismo and later movements. One can even detect a similar approach in his essay about the commercial context in which the Boom writers achieved success. One of his best-known texts, “The Boom in Perspective” (1979) explores the role played by new media and publishing houses in the creation of this literary phenomenon. When read alongside the study of the *gauchesque* style, it is easy to see that Rama is focusing on the same elements (a group of authors, a reading public, searching for the correct form to deliver a content), but the Boom authors seem to have less control, as if, now that they have become professional writers, the old literary system has been invaded by new actors. Rama devotes a few paragraphs to explain how the attention received from popular magazines and TV transformed our perception of the Latin American author, but the most important part of his essay is without a doubt his study of the marketing strategies employed by the European and regional publishing houses to increase their sales.¹⁰ After the Boom—after Latin American authors have “conquered professionalization”—Rama seems to be suggesting with his analysis that functions he used to assign to criticism (organizing the past, helping reflect on future cultural options) and to the literary system (creating a public, testing and finding the appropriate forms) are now in the hands of the world book market.

The last few years have seen an increased interest in Rama with studies in both English and Spanish focused on different aspects of his work.¹¹ While the theory of transculturation and the *letrado* theory still receive attention, there is also research into previously neglected areas of Rama’s work that is being used to produce innovative readings of contemporary (and world) literature.¹² The present volume seeks to contribute to rekindling interest in the rich and diverse work that Ángel Rama produced.

Translators’ Note

We have updated Rama’s endnotes using the Chicago Manual of Style, adding or changing information to make his references easier to find for

contemporary readers and replacing his quotations with translations available in English. Editor's notes have been added between brackets to distinguish them from Rama's original notes. Rama occasionally writes "America" or "Our America" to refer to Latin America and always uses "North America" or "North Americans" to designate the US and its inhabitants. Sometimes he makes a distinction between Spanish America, referring only to the Spanish speaking countries and literature from the region, and Latin America, when he wishes to include Brazil and Brazilian literature, but sometimes he uses them interchangeably. When a Latin American literary text has been translated into English, we refer to it using the title of the translation. When no translation exists, we have kept the title in Spanish.