

ROOTS OF THE CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The following study entitled "The Contemporary Latin American Literature" aims to seek the roots of the Latin American literature before 1940 in order to perceive the literary renovation in the new Latin American novel, the revolutionary change in language after 1940. The study is searching the social, historical and cultural background of the Contemporary Latin American literature to expose the process since the end of the nineteenth century until the period called 'Boom' of Latin American Literature pointing the literary interaction of Spanish and Latin American writers during the mentioned interval of time and revealing the modernist effects on the New Latin American novel. Thus the study attempts to present a general perspective of the contemporary Latin American novel which renovated itself from the 1940s henceforth occupying a prestigious place in the literatures of the world.

Keywords: Revolution of Language, Modernist Roots, Literary Interaction, "Boom", Tradition of Rupture

ÖZET

"Çağdaş Latin Amerika yazınının kökleri" başlıklı bu çalışma, Latin Amerika romanında 1940 sonrası görülen yazınsal değişimin ve dil devriminin 1940 öncesi köklerini araştırır. Çalışma, Çağdaş Latin Amerika yazınının toplumsal, tarihsel ve ekinsel artalanını araştırarak, ondokuzuncu yüzyıl sonundan 'Boom' adı verilen döneme dek gelişen süreci çözümleme ereğini güder. Bu bağlamda sözü edilen zaman diliminde İspanyol ve Latin Amerika yazarları arasındaki yazınsal etkileşim ve Modernist akımın Yeni Latin Amerika romanı üstündeki etkileri ele alınır. Çalışma, 1940 yılından bugüne kendini yenileyen ve dünya yazınında saygın bir yer edinen çağdaş Latin Amerika yazınına genel bir perspektiften sunmayı amaçlar.

Anahtar sözcükler: Dil Devrimi, Modernist Kökler, Yazınsal Etkileşim, "Boom", Geleneğin Kırılma Noktası

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Towards a new conception of literature: Historical, social and cultural causes

The year 1940 is determined by the literary critics as the beginning of the literary change in Latin America and it is not a coincidence that this date is significant. The Spanish Civil War ended and the Second World War broke out just before the year 1940. The distinguished critic of Latin American Literature, Emir Rodríguez-Monegal sets out the consequences of the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War on the literary change in Latin America after 1940: The Second World War interrupts the course of books and literary reviews from Europe to the continent. The interruption of the course of books and literary reviews which fostered the nostalgia to a refined civilization on the land of Latin America and the contribution of the distinguished Spanish intellectuals moving to the continent, particularly to Mexico and Argentina during the Civil War in Spain stimulates the foundation of publishing houses, institutes, libraries and museums. (Monegal 1970: 47,48) Yet a main contribution to the progress of Latin American literature may be the fact that leads the Latin American writer to consider writing as a profession. Ernesto Sábato states that the literature and specifically the novel is the desperate attempt of the writer to express the central obsession of his existence. He believes that the writer should be the witness of his time and has the obligation of telling the truth. Sábato says that living means to exist in the world in a historical condition, in a circumstance from which we can't avoid and we shouldn't avoid. According to the Argentinian author, the master pieces which have imprints of history are written with blood and they reflect the agony of their time. In this context, for Sábato, the novelist is a witness to history and a great novelist is an influential figure of his time. (Sábato 1963: 142) In the words of Sábato, we can clearly see the writer's approach to writing as a profession. In all his three novels, the attempt of Sábato to express the search of man of his time to find the answers to his existence can be seen. If he tells a story in his novel, his aim is not presenting to the reader a fictitious world but to ask the questions, to express the preoccupations in his mind using the fiction as a tool. The professional and constant effort of the Latin American writer for showing the reality of a nation becomes the writer's main concern after 1940. The reader is free to read the works of Carlos Fuentes or Mario Vargas Llosa as pure fiction; however, it should be considered that the stories they tell are not more than a tool to show what lies in the background, what the social and political circumstances of the time are, which problems and pains the Latin American man has confronted with. Therefore it can be said that the fiction serves to transmit what is on a writer's mind to the reader. Sábato, in his novels for instance, mixes his philosophical reflections about the existence of

man with fictitious aspects. Fuentes tells about the poverty, the weakness of a nation crushed and exploited by inner and outer powers. Another Mexican writer, Juan Rulfo also tells about the misery of his people using the description of an arid geography to emphasize the situation of man. The list can be extended. It should be noted that the word is used by the Latin American writer after 1940 to decipher the codes of a reality.

Besides the above mentioned reasons to feed the Latin American literature before 1940, the population explosion as a result of the migration to big cities and the change in the reader profile to come out by that population explosion also raises the Latin American literature as of 1940. The novel just like the theater is a genre which requires the urban concentration, so the circulation of literary works becomes possible with the crowds in big cities. Monegal states that following 1940, a radical change is observed in the cultural background of Latin America. First generation of readers as members of an elite following the works of foreign literature – particularly the Spanish and French literature - is gradually replaced by a second generation of readers who are interested in following the national works of literature. And the third generation of readers of the contemporary Latin American Literature is exclusively attentive to the national literature and has almost no patience or time which is not national. As a result of the social developments which help to raise the national consciousness, – to put an example, the Mexican Revolution accepted as a most considerable political and social landmark of the twentieth century in Mexico – the determined search for a national identity of the Latin American writer in his works motivates the second generation of reader to support the writer looking for the national identity. As to the contemporary reader, the search for a national identity is not an issue anymore but a necessity. (Monegal 1970: 48) The change observed in the Latin American novel after 1940 as a result of the writers's changing literary view is also the consequence of this new reader profile asking the questions to raise in his/her mind starting from the literary work. Although the reader is aware of the fact that it is possible to read the literary text as an aesthetical, autonomous work free from the social and historical conditions from which the text comes out, the number of readers increases day by day in Latin America after 1940 who also are aware of the fact that the literary text is an expression of reality, no matter how much fictitious it may be, it still emerges from determined social and political circumstances which shape the cultural background of a land and a nation. Julio Cortázar states that each time the reader opens the pages of a book written in one of those Latin American countries where the critical thinking and imagination are considered as a crime, he/she should read that book as if he/she has received the message in a bottle thrown into the sea to carry this message to

the furthest possible. And the message always reaches to the final destination, the bottles are taken and opened by the readers who will not understand only the meaning of the message sent but they will also see literature more than an aesthetic pleasure or an hour of rest. (Cortázar 1981: 29)

Monegal states that although distinguished writers appear in the literary background of Latin America all throughout the nineteenth century, it is not possible to see the novel as a genre with writers of many levels and a constant production until the twentieth century. The novel in the professional sense of the word appears as of 1940 which was stated to be a symbolic date. (Monegal 1970: 49) Alexis Márquez Rodríguez, another distinguished critic of the Latin American Literature, though states that the roots for the twentieth century Latin American novel should be sought in the nineteenth century, the Latin American novel of the nineteenth century is poor and incipient although there are novels and novelists that are individually very important. According to Rodríguez, the first generation of Latin American writers which are truly mature show in the twentieth century. (Rodríguez 2002) The main reason for the blooming of a new literary conception after 1940 should be sought in the determined orientation of the writer towards the search for the authentic roots and identity of the Latin American people. In the second half of the twentieth century, it is a fact that the Latin American writer reaches to a maturity in the professional sense of writing. Instead of imitating the foreign literary patterns and being inspired from imported "isms", the writer becomes conscious that the reality surrounding him is the reality of his own land, own people and that he no longer needs to go further than the frontiers of his own land to seek for the reality. To put a relevant example, the reader can find out in the poetry of Pablo Neruda the exploration for the elements of a landscape, the sea, the rocks, the sounds, etc., that surround the poet and later the history of his people into which the poet penetrates. As a matter of fact, most of the Latin American writers like Neruda who makes a first move similar to that of the poets of his age under foreign literary effects are fed by the distinguished writers of the twentieth century European novel such as Joyce, Kafka, Faulkner, Sartre, Proust, etc. Monegal states that the first generation of writers in the twentieth century in Latin America such as Miguel Ángel Asturias, Jorge Luis Borges, Alejo Carpentier, Agustín Yáñez, Leopoldo Marechal and the successive generation of writers such as João Guimarães Rosa, José Miguel Arguedas and Juan Rulfo are strongly and visibly swayed by the experimental and revolutionary literary movements and notable novelists. Whilst the first generation of writers in Latin America introduce few innovations in the internal structure of the novel and feel content with following almost always the traditional patterns, the second generation of writers will be noted above all

for attacking the novelistic form aiming the narrative efficiency and will disturb the reader emotionally and the third generation of writers who become aware of the creative and even revolutionary role of language will consequently obtain a sharp sensibility for using the language as the raw material of the narration. The common point for the third generation of writers such as Clarice Lispector, José Donoso, David Viñas, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Mario Vargas Llosa is the consciousness for realizing that the language is a strong organ for producing creative and radical changes in the literary work. (Monegal 1970: 54, 56) In the works of the second and third generation of writers the main aim is the literary creation. Whilst the writer questions the situation of man in his world as a central and essential theme in his work, looks on the other hand for the poetic structure and the language as an incentive of the literary creation and for the form that henceforth appears to be inseparable from the content since there seems to be no other access to content but through and by the form. Hence the main character of the writer's work after 1940 will precisely be the attitude for questioning radically the writing itself and language. The most profound and independent creators of those years struggle for a literature of which the greatest commitment has been with the literature itself. In that respect the position of the intellectual and the writer in Latin America is the position of a critic who intensely questions the reality in which he is involved.

Studying the motives of a literary summit in Latin America after 1940, the effects of Modernism to arise in Latin America towards the end of the nineteenth century and the literary interaction between the Latin American and Spanish writers in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries should be taken into consideration. Rubén Darío, the Nicaraguan poet known as the greatest representative of Modernism in Spanish language introduces Modernism in Spain and awakens the admiration of a group of young poets as defenders of Modernism which later would become significant writers of the Spanish literature like Antonio Machado, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Ramón María del Valle-Inclán and Jacinto Benavente. A later appearance of the Latin American Literature on the peninsula with a decisive influence on Spanish Literature takes place a few years later. At first stage, the Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro, accepted as one of the greatest Chilean poets together with Pablo Neruda, Nicanor Parra and Gabriela Mistral, the pioneer and representative of an aesthetic movement called Creacionismo influences the Spanish intellectuals and later Pablo Neruda, who is considered amongst the greatest and most prominent writers of his age proclaims in the peninsula his poetic conception at that time which he called "poesía impura", so different from the poetic conception

of Juan Ramón Jiménez. Neruda meets the greatest poets of his time, Federico García Lorca and Rafael Alberti. Later in 1935, the Spanish poet Manuel Altolaguirre gives him up the directorship of the literary magazine *Caballo verde para la poesía* and Neruda reaches to meet the poets of the "Generación del 27." (Gálvez Acero 1981: 9) During the second and third decades of the twentieth century, the greatest Latin American writers are published in Spain. In 1929, *Doña Bárbara* of the Venezuelan author Rómulo Gallegos is published in Madrid and has great success for the novelty the author was representing incorporating in the narrative the myth and legend. In such wise, Gallegos gives rise to a phenomenon called by Emir Rodríguez Monegal "protoboom" (Gálvez Acero 1981: 10) of the Latin American novel since the affect of the novel passes from Spain, which at that time was controlling the complete editorial market of Latin America, to the continent and has a strong influence on the works of Latin American writers who had then started to publish their works that soon would reach a universal success: Horacio Quiroga, Mariano Azuela, José Eustasio Rivera, Ricardo Güiraldes and Gallegos among others represent with their works the renovation in the Latin American literature of their time. Novels like *Doña Bárbara*, *Don Segundo Sombra*, *La vorágine*, *Los desterrados*, etc., appear in an aspect as preceding works before the mythical works of Juan Rulfo, Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa.

If the writer feels the unavoidable need of using different narrative techniques reflecting the preoccupations of his consciousness due to the changing of the social-historical events, he intends to analyze the cause of spiritual crisis and to look for its codes in order to find a possible way out of this crisis and the roots for all this search of the author should be searched in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The path that leads to the search of a narrative renovation is inscribed as "la tradición de la ruptura" by the Mexican writer Octavio Paz, that is a tradition which refuses to continue the road. (Gálvez Acero 1992: 19, 20) According to Monegal, for three times in the twentieth century, the Latin American Literature witnesses a violent rupture from the tradition: the rupture towards 1960, coinciding with the difusion of Cuban Revolution, the cultural crisis towards 1940 caused by the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War and the rupture of the avant-garde movement of the twenties. All those ruptures correspond to processes which have simultaneously two faces: if on the one hand each crisis breaks down with a tradition and sets out to establish a new estimation, on the other hand digs up in the close or far-off times to create a pedigree, to justify a lineage. (Monegal, 1990: 139) This explains why the origin of all the above mentioned agents as creators of a literary change beginning from 1940 should be sought in the first cultural/literary expressions

of Modernism, a period that marks the beginning of a true modern literary age in Latin America. Gálvez defines Modernity as the aesthetics of change, of the unsystematic, the fragmentary, the discontinuous, and in the ideological sense as the critical reflection of the signs of "crisis". This posture evidently manifests as a cult to plurality, syncretism and at textual level as the search for new in writing which comes up before the creator as an essential method in respective ways of critical reflection, agonizing at times, with regard to a continuous conscience of "crisis". (Gálvez Acero 1992: 21) Parallel to the rise of Modernism, economic liberalism and incipient industrialization develop in social-historical level and as a result most of the countries in Latin America (but certainly not all the social classes) delight in luxury and wealth. In this context, the characteristics which are traditionally known as typical of modernist literature (heterogeneity, passion for liberty, novelty, longing for renewal, syncretism, etc.) act as the starting point of a change for unlimited aesthetic search that by different routes will be accomplished all throughout the period of Modernity and the modernists will give start to a new sensibility. The modernist novel is related with the phenomenon of birth of Modernity in Latin America and the period is the origin of the true change. (Gálvez Acero 1992: 22, 24) All throughout the modernist period and at the beginning of thirties, the most important Latin American narrators are discovered, published and praised by Spanish intellectuals and the literature in Latin America turns out to be accepted internationally. Some of the most eminent writers of that time such as the Uruguayan writer Horacio Quiroga, The Mexican writers Mariano Azuela and Martín Luis Guzmán, the Colombian writer José Eustasio Rivera, the Venezuelan writer Rómulo Gallegos and the Argentinian writer Ricardo Güiraldes see their works published in Spain by publishing houses that distributed these works all over the Hispanic world. Monegal states that at that time, there were few novelists in Spain that could be compared with Latin American novelists in narrative skill and passion. Although most of those Latin American writers had been explored out of the frontiers of Latin America, the greatest work produced by them such as *Los desterrados* of Horacio Quiroga or *El águila y la serpiente* of Martín Luis Guzmán contained a legendary poetic vision of occult realities of the New World. (Monegal 1971: 498, 499) In a sense, these works set up an invisible link with the narrations of the early explorations and discoveries that Latin America introduced to the European reader.

The weakness of the Latin American novel before 1940s lies in the presentation of the inner conflicts of its characters. In the works of the most famous novelists of the twenties and thirties, the landscape and the wild nature dominates, molds or crushes the man and so the individual almost disappears or is

reduced (as in *Doña Bárbara* of Rómulo Gallegos, *Don Segundo Sombra* of Ricardo Güiraldes, *Los de abajo* of Mariano Azuela) to an archetype; the character is not a man but a symbol, a figure in a hostile world. The presentation of human conflicts is generalized. The geography is everything and the man, nothing. Whereas for the new novelists the centre of gravity changes radically from a landscape created by God to an urban landscape created and inhabited by man. Big cities take the role from pampas and mountains. For the novelists of twenties and thirties, the big city is a far-off presence, arbitrary and mysterious. For the new novelists the city is the core, the place to which the protagonists of the new novel are attracted irresistibly. In this context, while he is a non-identity in the crowd, he becomes a true living being. Although the new novelists are still concerned about the rural themes and go on searching the traditional struggle of man against nature, the main figures of the new novel are not abstract figures anymore but complex beings. If the new novelist still observes the rural landscape of country man, of the gaucho, this is because he wants to reveal the mythical aspect of the country man.

The new economic-social changes which occur since 1940s bring innovations to the Latin American novel. The growth of big cities emerging as a result of industrialization causes an emphatic change in the fiction which previously has taken nature as its basic theme; yet the fiction after 1940s underlines the importance of man in the big city. Man and his internal universe become the indisputable main concern of the novel and the novel appears enriched with the influence of the distinguished European writers of the time like Kafka, Joyce, Unamuno, etc., and the revolutionary scientific-ideological advances like psychoanalysis and existentialism. (Gálvez Acero 1981: 10) Although the fiction of twenties and thirties progress parallel to poetic avant-garde movement, possibly because of this parallelism, it does not show the beneficial influence of this literary movement, that is to say the linguistic experimentalism which the various avant-garde "isms" mean like "ultraísmo", the revolutionary poetic movement of the 1920s in Argentina, "estridentismo", the artistic movement of the 1920s in Mexico and "surrealismo" in Chile. The literary avant-garde movement has repercussions on the novel since 1940s and constitutes one of the principal keys to explain the definitive literary renovation on the Latin American novel of the following decades. Hereby the Latin American novel from 1940s to 1960s should be considered as the beginning of the literary change. (Gálvez Acero 1981: 11, 12) *El Señor Presidente* of Miguel Ángel Asturias (1946), *Hombres de maíz* of the same author (1949), *Al filo del agua* of Agustín Yáñez (1947), *El Túnel* of Ernesto Sábato (1948), *La vida breve* of Juan Carlos Onetti (1950), *Los pasos perdidos* of Alejo Carpentier (1953), *Pedro Páramo* of Juan

Rulfo (1953), *La región más transparente* of Carlos Fuentes (1958), *Los ríos profundos* of José María Arguedas (1958) and *La casa verde* of Mario Vargas Llosa (1966) among others appear as milestones throughout the process of the change in Latin American novel. The novels which appear during the forties, fifties and sixties reflect a significant progress between the old conception of the novel represented by the realist-telluric conception of Rómulo Gallegos, José Eustasio Rivera, Ricardo Güiraldes or the realist conception of the social and political denunciation of Mariano Azuela, Ciro Alegría, Jorge Icaza, etc., and the new and more complicated current conception having roots as much in this old conception of the novel as in the poetic avant-garde renovation, in the greatest American and European novelists like Dos Passos, Hemingway, Faulkner, Joyce, Miller, Gombrowitz, Hesse, Gide, among others and in especially three Argentinian authors, Roberto Arlt, Jorge Luis Borges and Macedonio Fernández. This literary phenomenon culminates in the process called “boom” of 1960s which brings new changes to the Latin American literature.

“Boom” as a term, popularized in Italy by journalists of weekly papers of a wide circulation passes from these papers to the Argentinian subsidiaries of the same. At that time, Tomás Eloy Martínez and Luis Harss were writing in *Primera Plana* and both were known as journalists and critics. It is in this weekly paper for the first time that the term is used, however it is not known if it was Martínez or Harss to use it for the first time. “Boom” indicates the editorial phenomenon of expansion, advertising and approval of the new Latin American novel. (Monegal 1980: 186, 187.) Shaw points out that the expansion of editorial industry in especially two important centres as maximum concentration of novel in Latin America, Mexico and Argentina, and the activity of the publishing houses, especially that of Seix Barral in Europe have great influence in the wide spreading of the new Latin American novel, especially when it is taken into consideration that there were countries on the continent with a poor literary tradition. (Shaw 2003: 237) The literary novel creates its own reading public and forms or changes important aspects of the public’s taste of literary conception. However, this requires the accomplishment of certain conditions. In the first place, the qualitative level of the writer’s work should exceed an average level. This explains the difference between the success of the “novela de la tierra” and the new novel in Latin America. Despite important individual success (*Doña Bárbara*, *Don Segundo Sombra*), there are not many exceptional writers at that time and the ones to appear do not produce a sufficient number of significant works. Therefore, although most outstanding works of “novela de la tierra” win the public giving the reader a new literary taste and are translated, “novela de la tierra” does not succeed. Whereas the new novelists make a significant jump

in quality and there has been a radical change in the attitude of the novelist towards the novel. The prompt success of the new novelists of that period come with the reformist or revolutionary character of the novel. Shaw states that the novel in Latin America is born from dissidence. (Shaw 2003: 251) There have always been novels on the continent of which the supreme purpose of the author has been raising the awareness of the reader and fulfilling the obligation of the author to resist oppression and injustice. The novel should concern the reader not only with its political and social content but by its power reflecting reality and furthermore also showing the existential being of man. The novel should change the perceptive habits of its reader. This has been the great success of the period called "Boom" in Latin America.

As a conclusion, at present, Latin America can offer the literary work of at least three or four generations of novelists who go on to certify the incessant renovation of a genre. However, the new Latin American novel is the result of a long and laborious process. It lasts several decades and the profound continuity of a genre is periodically interrupted and renewed by new experiences. This process is called "la tradición de la ruptura" (tradition of rupture) by Octavio Paz. (Monegal 1971: 498) The new novelists combine a sharp sensibility with a notable narrative delicacy to describe the transcendental dimensions of reality taking into consideration all aspects of politics and social life. A new conception of man emerges from the chaos and the economic exploitation, from the revolts and poverty. Latin American writer reaches maturity in language and literature. With the total revolution of language, the Latin American writer creates a new literature. The language of the new Latin American novel is formed basically on the expression of reality which from Borges to Asturias, the most considerable Latin American writers have produced and developed as the expression of their own voice. As a result, the new Latin American novel achieves to be the most complete tool to explore reality and to transmit another reality which is the reality of the language. The writer's main purpose becomes to create a specific language, by which he can reflect a new literature in search of experimental literary forms; it is a language of the land, of the nation, not a mere imitation of the old forms of language. The writer requires to use the word to save the literary work from the traditional and conservative relations with the past and to illuminate it with a new, original and strong identity. Hence the Latin American writer fulfills the mission of exploring and transmitting a reality of his own land and nation through the word by which he tries to find new narrative techniques. It is the language which shows the reader the reality of an agonizing land, but a language which defamiliarizes the reader.

In this way, the contemporary Latin American literature presents truly

revolutionary writers in the twentieth century after 1940 in a relatively short period. The new Latin American writer adopts the language to say his word as a witness of his age and uses the language with literary efficiency. In little more than half a century, during the lapse that passes between the voyage of Rubén Darío to Spain in 1898 and 1960s, the Latin American literature makes a huge progress and becomes a literary centre of our age.

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