

Notes on Latin American Romanticism 1825–1875

During the middle 50 years (roughly speaking) of the 19th century the principal humanities movement in Latin America is that of Romanticism. This movement was fairly derivative from European Romanticism, but this period also shows a late continuation of Neoclassical tendencies with elements imported especially from England and France. Elements in thought, style, manner that are typical of Romanticism in the humanities, and especially in literature, are: (1) a focus on the individual; (2) a dedication to personal and political liberty and freedom; (3) passion in terms of emotions and the expression of individuality that may include suffering; (4) appreciation for and treatment of new subject matters in art and ideas that include extremes such as the sublime or the ideal on the one hand and the ugly or grotesque on the other hand; (5) lyricism in music and poetry including melodramatic personal styles and melodrama in the theater or drama; (6) foregrounding of sensitivity (*la sensibilidad; lo sensible*) to nature, the poor and the sick, etc.; and (7) discovery or inclusion in the humanities of what traditional Latin American society, which had been dominated by culture from France, Spain, and Portugal, had been seen as exotic (i.e., coming from Asia, Oceania, or the Middle East, etc.).

Generally speaking, Romanticism in Europe occurs closer to the beginning of the 19th century than in Latin America. Due to the fact that Latin America was engaged almost exclusively in fighting wars of independence, actual Latin American Romanticism in the humanities does not start until after most of the continent was liberated by 1825. After independence, Romanticism sees a parallel political and humanistic struggle between liberals who demand democratic reforms and conservatives who support traditional local leaders (caudillos) or even dictators at the newly formed national level. Romanticism, then, coincides and duplicates the Latin American project of beginning to define national identities and boundaries. With the advent of freedom from the three European metropolises, Latin Americans take the first steps in discovering their own unique realities and identities. This discovery includes, more than any time before in the arenas of official culture, the Latin American earth, flora, and fauna themselves, indigenous peoples, their own histories, differences in dialects and languages, legends, myths, local traditions, and the like.

During this period Latin American painting focused on themes of local color, idealized scenes of the countryside, significant historical events, and portraits. One fine example of the latter is the 1855 portrait of the wife of the flamboyant Mexican general and long-term president, Santa Anna, Dolores Tosta de Santa Anna.



Given the fact that Latin America emerged from the wars of independence poor, disorganized, and suffering from death and destruction, it should come as no surprise that politicians and humanists alike produced prose essays and prose fiction (i.e., the novel) as the primary means of expression in this their first semi-independent cultural project. Novelists especially learn about social and political rebellion in the worldwide cultural movement of Romanticism, and they then live it in their own countries. In Argentina the novel tends toward historical and political documentaries. In Mexico, Venezuela, Peru, and Chile novels of this period are evocative adventure stories with picaresque elements. When these prose writers look at Latin American nature they see both indigenous and *criollo* elements. They describe emotion-filled events; they defend humanitarian ideals and democratic principles; they oppose dictators; they defend native peoples; they moralize; they glorify national heroes; they exalt in flights of emotional lyricism and sentimentalism; and they paint visual and word pictures of scenes of local customs and color.

Among the most prominent writers in this period are:

(1) **José María Heredia** (1803-1839), the prominent Cuban poet of the prototypical Romantic movement; he spend many years of his life in exile in the United States and Mexico due to his support for Cuban independence from Spain; three of his most famous poems are “*Himno del desterrado*,” “*En el teocalli de Cholula*,” and the very famous “*Niágara*,” which is a long Romantic hymn-like poem celebrating the natural force and beauty of Niagara Falls. For the poem and the Study Questions on Heredia, see: => “*En el teocalli de Cholula*.” Here's a portrait of the poet:



- (2) Argentinian novelist José Mármol, who wrote about the Argentinian civil war and the dictator Juan Manuel Rosas in his novel *Amalia* (1851);
- (3) Colombian writer Jorge Isaacs, whose novel *María* (1867) is a typically Romantic sentimental love narrative;
- (4) Cuban Cirilo Villaverde's slave abolitionist novel *Cecilia Valdés* (1892);
- (5) The historical novel *Enriquillo* (1882) about the extermination of the indigenous people of Hispaniola by Manuel Jesús Galván, who was from the Dominican Republic;
- (6) Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-1888), who wrote the historical essay *Vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga* (1845). The political novel in Argentina begins with *Amalia*, a novel intended to express criticism about Argentinian society and government during the decades following independence from Spain, decades that were dominated by Rosas (1793-1877) and his dictatorship (1829-1851). After independence Argentina degenerated into a civil war fought essentially between centralists in Buenos Aires and federalists in the provinces. Rosas was the brutal dictator from the Europeanized city of Buenos Aires. Sarmiento, Mármol, and provincial regionalists were opposed to him.

Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's outstanding book is a historical analysis in literary style about the conflict, which Sarmiento reduces to a battle between civilization and barbarism (*civilización y barbarie*). This theme of the binary opposition between violence on the one hand and "civilization" (i.e., peace, high culture, progress, republican democracy, industrialization, etc.) on the other hand, as first proposed by Sarmiento, has been used by many, though not all, scholars—both Latin Americans and others—as a convenient scheme for describing Latin America. In *Facundo*, Sarmiento uses the Argentinian gaucho as a typical representative of "barbarism"; i.e., a totally individualistic, violent, mysterious, incomprehensible enemy of civilization who lives in the vast hinterland of the pampas. The horse is the gaucho's quasi-mythical symbol according to this scheme. There is a contradiction in this analysis, however, for Sarmiento sees the essence of Argentinian nationalism in the autochthonous character of the rugged individualists who inhabit the open plains of the interior regions. Sarmiento was educated in the traditions of French neoclassical

encyclopedia; for him Rosas was the symbol of barbarity; but Sarmiento also saw the gaucho warlord Facundo as the quintessential representative of the brute force of the pampas that was opposed to civilization. In this sense, then, Sarmiento's book contains a foreshadowing of conflicts within Latin American self-consciousness and historical reality. (For an image of gauchos see these slides: **Opening Slide Show #XX** and **#XXX**.)

José Mármol (1817-1871), who lived in exile in Montevideo, Uruguay from 1839 to 1952, wrote his novel *Amalia* in 1844, but it was not published until the end of Rosas' dictatorship, 1851-1855. It is a political novel written as a legal accusation against the dictator. Mármol based this work of fiction on official documents, newspaper accounts, and correspondence. In addition, the novel deals on the surface with a romantic love theme, whereas the events are the backdrop for the love story: Amalia is in love with Daniel Belgrano and Daniel Bello is in love with Florencia. True to the dominant aspects of Romanticism, *Amalia* does not lack for the kind of melodrama that heightens hatred of Rosas; one cannot say that the central characters are three-dimensional or verisimilar. The figure of Rosas comes through in dialogue: he is depicted as profane, picturesque, cruel, and insulting. Nevertheless, this work marks the true beginning of the novel in Argentina. Mármol handles plot action with the kind of narrative expertise one finds in European writers such as Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832; Scottish novelist known for English romanticism) and Alexandre Dumas *père* (1802-1870; French romantic writer).

The Colombian writer **Jorge Isaacs** (1837-1895) produced perhaps the most quintessentially romantic work of Latin America, *María* (1867) by featuring the aesthetic, idealistic aspect of nature along with criollo-centered realism. He was an active liberal who sided with patriotic aristocrats. He served Colombia as a diplomat, and he opposed the nineteenth-century civil wars that plagued his country. He was influenced by the classics of European Romanticism: *Werther* (Germany, 1774), *Paul et Virginie* (France, 1787), and *Atala* (France, 1801). *María* is, in a phrase, a lachrymose love story in which the love theme is approached from within the romantic mythology of love: fatalism, love, death, outside concrete reality. In accord with the tenets of Romanticism, Isaacs demonstrates a tendency toward subjectivism, idealism, sensitivity, and sentimentalism. It is written in the first person from the perspective of a young man who has lost his beloved María. By carefully blending a hyper-romantic plot with poetic prose and various aspects of Colombian regionalism, Isaacs was able to produce a work that later influenced twentieth-century Latin American *regionalismo*.

The most versatile of all Latin American humanists during this period is the Venezuelan polymath **Andrés Bello** (1781-1865), who published major prose works in the humanities, law, philosophy, education, and philology. His most well known work is the *Castilian Grammar Intended for the Use by Americans* (1847). In addition, however, he was an accomplished poet in the vein that

bridged the modes of Neoclassicism and Romanticism. Another important Romantic poet from Latin America is the Cuban José María Heredia (1803-1839), who also bridges the transition from Neoclassicism to Romanticism.

For a representative figure of this movement, click on the following image of the Cuban poet **Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda** (1814-1873). She was born in Camagüey, Cuba, but she moved to Spain definitively in 1836, except for a visit back to Cuba from 1859 to 1863. She wrote plays, novels, short fiction narratives, letters, and poetry.



Transition to Latin American *modernismo* and the Twentieth Century (1850-1900)

During the latter part of the Romantic Period the work of Latin American humanists transitioned into what one could call Romantic Realism (*realismo romántico*). As this phrase implies, Latin American romantics were influenced by the European developments that have been called "realist". Writers such as Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Pérez Galdós, and painters such as Corot, Courbet, and Daumier influenced their counterparts in Latin America. The latter began to reproduce what were seen as typical aspects of Latin American reality in the countryside and in the cities. They depicted authentic *criollo* characteristics often in a stereotypical fashion. They studied unique features of Latin American dialects, and they attempted to reproduce them in ways they saw as faithful to the details of objective reality. They tended to glorify heroes, and, in a positivistic way, they were quick to divide characters and personalities into the binary opposites of good and evil. For example, Alberto Blest Gana (Chile, 1830-1920) sought to become the Balzac of Chile. He chronicled local, regional Chilean reality by using historical materials, but he did not fuse psychological analysis with his version of epic localism. Blest Gana's most well known work is his novel *Martín Rivas* (1861). This realist novel depicts middle class and upper class economy by showing the customs and styles in language of the period. The protagonist, Martín Rivas, is portrayed in scenes of

sentimental domestic conflict and love as the representative of a new social force in the development of Chilean society.

When Latin American artists began painting historical subjects, they were slow to break entirely from European themes, but, given the criollo society for which they painted, painters at mid-century often injected New World elements into their canvases. One example of the new within a traditional academy painting is "Columbus Before the Catholic Monarchs" (1850) by the Mexican painter Juan Cordero. When he unveiled his canvas at the Mexican Academy in 1851 he said that this was the first work ever showing native Americans being introduced at the Spanish court in 1493.



One visual example of the use of realism to depict key historical moments is this painting that depicts the results of a tragic War of the Triple Alliance in Paraguay. The painting is by the Uruguayan artist Juan Manuel Blanes (1830-1901). It is titled "Paraguay: Image of Your Desolate Country" (1880).



As Blanes' painting suggests, during the transition period, various fields of the Latin American humanities focused history. Notable in these fields is the historical novel. With the rise of a rudimentary middle class, fitful political developments, the introduction of industrialization in major urban areas, and early national efforts at improving education, a growing number of people became passionate consumers of literature. The historical novel began at this time. In it readers enjoyed descriptions legends, superstitions, duels over offended honor, revenge, erotic intrigue, and daily life in the old colonial times. Novelists were influenced by European writers such as Sir Walter Scott, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, and Alessandro Manzoni. The Latin American historical novel in general tends toward works that are theorizing and preaching rationalist liberalism. They read like plodding documentaries at the same time that they can

be melodramatic and sentimental. The prevalence of politics, adventure, and heroism, however, can be seen as preparing the ground for the so-called novel of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). When the Latin American novel enters the twentieth century the writers are also witnesses and participants in the historical dramas which serve as the core subject matter of their works. They write to discharge a sense of personal responsibility vis-à-vis the separate countries and their fellow citizens.

As a corollary or sub-genre to the historical novel, we also find a number of novels whose aim was to idealize native Americans (i.e., Indians). Latin American writers such as Clorinda Matto de Turner (1854-1909) found inspiration for this kind of work in European authors such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and François-René de Chateaubriand, who idealized American natives whom these French writers thought of as being both primitive and ideal. Latin Americans used indigenous words, traditions, both of which enriched the European-based language and discourse Spanish-Americans, French-Americans, and Portuguese Americans had inherited from their respective "mother countries". Matto de Turner was a Peruvian woman whose writings were as combative as they were prolific. She expressed vigorous denunciations against the infra-human conditions of exploited Peruvian native peoples. Although nowadays the plots in her works seems weak (e.g., impossible love stories, absurd action), nevertheless there is power in her fictional campaigns for social justice.

Although it is not one of the most distinctive of the humanities movements in Latin America, it is worth noting the influence of Realistic Naturalism (*el realismo naturalista*) by some Latin American writers at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Most notably, the French novelist Émile Zola provided the model for viewing people and society from a pseudo-scientific viewpoint of positivism. The aim of the humanistic products of this movement were to make detailed observations of documentary, material reality; expose and denounce social injustice, poverty, and corruption; defend the rights of workers, women, and children; preach the Naturalist doctrine in order to prove their theses. Naturalism in Latin America, as in Spain and Portugal, never attained the extremes that it did in France. Characteristics of the movement in Latin America are: minute description, stylistic simplicity, picturesque countryside scenes, and observation of specific moments of social crisis.

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