

Modernism and Spanish Vanguard in Dialogue with Portugal

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Abstract

The literature of Modernism and the Vanguard in Spain reaches a new dimension if, from a comparative perspective, it is linked to Portuguese literature. Based on the principle of "literary polysystem" and considering that Modernism and Vanguard can be understood as a heterogeneous continuum, it is possible to redefine the role played by the Spanish and Portuguese modernist and Avant-Garde writers in the artistic and literary dialogue involving modernity. From that perspective, I analyze the main cases of authors who favored dialogue between the literatures of both countries between 1890 and 1936.

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The history of Spanish literature has regularly dealt, sometimes in a patronizing or even condescending manner, with some of the fundamental chapters of its development of the concept of 'historical vanguard' or, in broader terms, 'vanguard'. Regarded too many times, in our letters, as the weakest link of the modernity chain, as an unavoidable factor in face of the charges from the other European 'isms', it is not hard to be tempted to think that the Historic Vanguard, with the leading role of Ultraism and Creationism, was an uncertain and dubious episode bringing little or nothing to the canon of 20th century Spanish Literature. From that traditional perspective, Ultraism – probably the frailest victim – would have become similar to a defeated page in the most distinguished Spanish literature, in ruins or in a common grave where the remains of several dozens of names rest, forgotten by history in the generational narratives, performing a prodigious pirouette from *Modernismo* and the Generation of '98 to the Generation of '27, and having Ramón Gómez de la Serna, the international protagonist, as the sole representative element of the uncertain time of the vanguard.

But how is it possible that the Ultraist movement, subject of the approval and concern of Jorge Luis Borges, with the proximity of a young Federico García Lorca and pronouncing for the first time (thanks to Adriano del Valle y Rogelio Rueda) the name of Bernarda Passera among the Spanish vanguardists, has

appeared so many times, like a ghost, in the textbooks of the history of Spanish literature? The answer to this question has many faces, and is probably related to conceptual and methodological matters, directly affecting Spanish national literature, and acquiring a new dimension if studied under a broader and more inclusive perspective that is methodologically based not only on the history of literature, but also on compared literature, bestowing the Iberian space with some traits that enable us to approach it as a literary polysystem, in constant dialogue with the concepts of identity and territory, formed by "a net of interdependent elements in which the specific role of each element is determined by its relationship towards the rest" (Iglesias Santos 1999: 9).

The reluctance with which the history of Spanish literature has approached Modernism, as a time-period category, according to what Juan Ramón Jiménez defended, has a lot to do with this vision. The explanation may lie in the construction of a literary system focused on a generational model and in considering the term *Modernismo* as a simple aesthetic category resulting, on various occasions, in the existence of a literary history grounded on too small of segments and, often faced or blurred chronologically by the mere fact that they belong to different or irreconcilable sectors or aesthetic trends. This circumstance gave rise to a somehow fragmented landscape of the first decades of Spanish Literature in the 20th century, depriving us of a more inclusive and plural interpretation of the diverse literary phenomena being produced within the Iberian context. This new interpretation would afford a vision, not lineal but simultaneous, of the movements making up the vanguard, drawing a plural and fully heterogeneous map, as desired by Octavio Paz, of the tradition of rupture (Paz 1991), in which a core vision of the time we have mentioned would triumph, since, if we made a transverse section of the instant of Modernism (Santillán 2002: 65) – in a timeperiod sense –, we would find a soil perfectly stratified around the principle of multiplicity: 'The timespan that stretches between the fall of the aesthetic *Modernismo* and the arrival of the Generation of '27 will actually be "one of the most blurred historiographical times of our literary history" (Carnero 1988: 16), and its narrow interpretation has prevented, as José-Carlos Mainer argues, the correct interpretation of the *continuum* of modernity in our letters:

Methodologically, dealing with the Generation of '27 has hindered for many years the admission of the vanguard in Spain as an autonomous history, with its proper place – a modest yet significant – to ultraism and creationism. And it has also prevented, which is more serious, to see modernity as a *continuum*, instead of as a collapsed movement of successive generations.

The confusion generated in Spanish language by the double meaning, in terms of aesthetics and period, of the word *Modernismo*, along with the secular tendency of the Spanish historiography to isolate itself and to refuse to look at other national literatures, prompted, for decades, certain precautions against any sign of deep plurality that fled from a linear and univocal system in the Spanish literature before the civil war. Menéndez Pidal himself warned, in the prologue of the *Historia general de las literaturas hispánicas*, of the danger of this isolation, stating that 'what makes you lose even more interest in the study of Spanish literature in relation to the others is to historicize it without properly relating it to the events of foreign literatures' (Menéndez Pidal 1949: XLIIII). All schemes outlined thus far probably did nothing but reproduce in the historiographical domain, safeguarding the distances, the old Spanish tirade that had been fashionable since the 18th century, as a modern way of nostalgia, of placing writers, on opposite trenches of the conflict: those who aimed to open the doors of national literature to the contact with other foreign literatures and those who were committed to the search of genuine elements in our culture, refusing to look themselves in the mirror of their neighbors (Torrecilla 1996a, 1996b and 2006).

These two circumstances, the isolation and the difficulty to fit the different pieces of Modernism and the Vanguard into literary history – as pieces too often distanced from each other as isolated compartments – are responsible for the fact that the idea of our modernity as a permeable *continuum* to other literatures has had to be retrieved more recently, adding more elements to consider. This accomplishment is especially significant when applied to the context of the Iberian Peninsula, where linguistic and cultural richness has sadly been neglected from a historiographical perspective, affording a prominent place to Spanish national literature (in Castilian), at the expense of a possible dialogue with others such as Catalan or Galician literatures or, especially, Portuguese national literature, the case which interests us the most. Claudio Guillén has repeatedly drawn attention to the fact that all the "fundamental components of the literary historiography, that is to say, all the larger units, like the periods, the currents, the schools or the movements [...] cannot be reduced to a national scale" (2005: 333). If one adds to this fact, especially in the Iberian context, the problematization implied by the word "national" (Guillén 1998: 299), with the ideological connotations attached (Valdés 2004: 15–17), many of the criteria traditionally used to study Spanish literature show the need to offer a new methodological framework to approach it, especially for a time period like the one that we are considering, from the early stages of the 20th century through to the outbreak of the Civil War, which is marked by a strong determination for dialogue and the international openness of many of its writers

To these circumstances we must also add a perspective in approaching the literary system not only as a production device, but, in parallel, as a reception device, dialogue and assimilation or rejection. This approach opens up the possibility of understanding the Iberian literatures of Modernism and the Vanguard as a plural and multiple field of opportunities for relationships in a geographic context particularly rich and ripe for it, based on the notion of literary poly-system proposed by Even-Zohar and, in that case, always relying on a transnational vision instead of on a purely Hispanicist one (Resina 2009), of Peninsular literatures (Abuñ González and Tarrío Varela 2004; Cabo Aseguinolaza, Abuñ González and Domínguez 2010).

Considering the particular case of the Portuguese and Spanish context, this plural and complementary vision will allow us to change from a unique and monolithic system (the sum of various systems) to a dynamic poly-system, in constant transformation, with multiple structures being built and rebuilt on the basis of a system of internal aesthetic oppositions. Furthermore, this methodology will allow us to grant the weaker and smaller units of our literary history (such as Ultram, already mentioned), a theoretical space in which one should also consider the significant contribution of the effective mediators: those involved in the reception process of other literatures, singularly translators, turned into specific bridges promoting dialogue between cultures. Thus, we will build an itinerary that, on the one hand, will make it possible to claim the heterogeneous *continuum* formed by Modernism and the Vanguard in Spanish literature and, on the other, will allow us to perceive and define the communicating vessels that, from an ideological and aesthetic standpoint, were transforming Portuguese and Spanish literatures, making them either permeable to international trends or strictly Iberian.

José-Carlos Mainer has recently written that modernity in Spain was, as a matter of fact, a modernity of 'anti-moderns' (2010: 6), supported by the concept of Antoine Compagnon (2007), according to whom it was carried out by "moderns in liberty" that approached progress with skepticism and frequently devoted themselves to a dangerous – for a vanguardist artist – exercise of melancholy. This insightful appraisal that we can also extend, in a way, to the domain of the first Portuguese vanguardist writers (first modernists, according to the Portuguese terminology), has a lot to do with the concept of *continuum* that we have mentioned and with the possibility of interpreting the path leading from symbolism, or (aesthetical) modernism and the Generation of '98, to the rise of the Generation of '27 as a journey without radical breaks, a picture closer to geological strata than to rigid geometric segments. When drawing this picture, it can help us, to a great extent, to broaden the focus of attention to a perspective in which Portuguese literature engages in a dialogue with the Spanish contemporary

In fact, if we understand the modernist time, broadly speaking, like a plural time frame comprised between the arrival of Symbolism to Iberian poetry (occurring in 1890 by the hand of the poet from Coimbra, Eugénio de Castro, with the publication of *Oaristos*) and the development of the poetry of '27 and the second Portuguese modernism, until the disaster caused by the Spanish Civil War and, secondly, the Second World War (with the partial collapse of the chain of modernity in the Iberian Peninsula and the major emergence of social or neorealist trends), it is possible to draw from a historiographical perspective, parallel lines that cross the Spanish and Portuguese literatures in an analogous manner.

Elsewhere I have argued for analyzing the plural *continuum* of modernism and the vanguard in Portuguese and Spanish contexts following three fundamental stages, in obvious ideological and aesthetic harmony (three stages, as I contended, that despite having a phase of maximum expression, overlap without cancelling previous ones) (Sáez Delgado 2010: 29–43):

- (a) The stage of Portuguese Symbolism and Spanish Modernism, on the one hand, and, at the same time, Portuguese Saudosism and the Spanish Generation of '98, with a broad range of common ideological and aesthetic features in both cases in the two countries, which we could frame approximately between 1890 and 1915;
- (b) The stage of the historic vanguard marked in Spain mostly by Ultraism (1918) and also by Creationism (1916), that brought Chilean writer Vicente Huidobro to Spain, and in Portugal by the first Modernism, a group congregated around the *Orpheu* magazine (1915), with a time frame that leads us to 1927;
- (c) The time of the 'second vanguard', from 1927 to the outbreak of the civil war, with the upraise of '27 and the appearance, in parallel and in the same year, of the Second Portuguese Modernism, generated from the magazine *presença*.

This perspective enables us, indeed, to place movements, schools and generations in open dialogue with a broader perspective and aims at finding points of contact between the two literatures and, as a result, it enlightens us on the findings that have traditionally been accomplished by each of them, from a strictly national perspective. This roadmap is also enriched by the fact that the above chronological (and largely aesthetic) parallelism in no way means that the fate of both literatures, from the point of view of their achievements and their participation in the 20th century canon, were the same in the period described since we find fundamental and enlightening differences when we

approach the concept of hegemony in Peninsular literatures. In fact, from the three stages introduced, the second is the most important one for Portuguese literature, that of the First Modernism associated with the father figure of Fernando Pessoa and other fundamental names, such as Mário de Sá-Carneiro or José de Almada Negreiros, who live in the least significant moment – according to the canon, understood as 'the literary art of memory' (Bloom 1998: 191) – of the Spanish literature in the mentioned period, that of the Historic Vanguard, dominated by Ultraism, placed between the great authors of '98 and those of the Generation of '27.

This condition that enables these two literatures to put their pieces together as in a perfect puzzle, results in the Iberian polysystem and the articulation of the great historic moments of each of them in the *continuum* of modernity, compels us to focus our attention and put the spotlight on other minor elements in the process, the fruits of which are not as important to literary history but, without whose role, the ecosystem in which the fruits of canonical authors bloomed would have been completely different.

Thus it is difficult to explain the importance of the work of Fernando Pessoa without mentioning the role Teixeira de Pascoaes played in his education and his saudosism theories, which marked to a large extent, his ideological, conceptual and aesthetic universe (or, better named, *pluriverse*). Something similar occurs with the symbolist Eugénio de Castro, the most respected Portuguese poet published in Spain in the first half of the 20th century (Sáez Delgado 2008: 13–35), whose work, according to the Parnassian fashion of the sense of rhythm and meter, meant for Portuguese poetry a significant willingness to place the depth of the poem on the surface, laying some of the theoretical foundations that would, years later, be revisited by the vanguardist poets.

Something similar occurs in Spanish literature, where it is difficult to assign the Generation of '27 the role that it has been given in the history of literature without considering the value, even the gestures, that Creationism and Ultraism had, as immediate predecessors (along with Ramón Gómez de la Serna) of the process of the full arrival of modernity in Spain. Ultraism has many times been accused of being short of significant fruits – Guillermo de Torre himself recognized that the movement "was more prodigal in gestures and signs than in works, richer in group magazines than in individual works" (Torre 1965: 542), and it is likely that the responsibility of this opinion is also related to the difficulty that this *continuum* reading has had in the history of Spanish literature. For if it is accurate to say that the works of ultraist poets in book form are extremely rare (*La rueda de color*, by Rogelio Buendía; *Hélices*, by Guillermo de Torre; *Gárgola*, by José María Souvirón; *Mercedes*, by Pedro Rainer; *Feminine* by Iman Chahar; *Criador* by Rafael I Affón; *Reflexions* by Valentín

Andrés Álvarez: *La sombrilla japonesa*, by Isaac del Vando-Villar, and some other titles), it is no less accurate to claim that the true fruits of the Historical Vanguard should be searched in a parallel manner among the first books of some of the names of '27, in which the spirit of modernity had reached a greater harmony under the formula that interpreted the vanguard as tradition and tradition as the vanguard: *Libro de poemas* (1921), by Federico García Lorca; *Imagen* (1922), *Manual de espumas* (1924) and *Versos humanos* (1925), by Gerardo Diego; *Presagio* (1923), by Pedro Salinas; *Marinero en tierra* (1925), by Rafael Alberti; *Tiempo* (1925), by Emilio Prados; *El ala del sur* (1926), by Pedro Garfias; or *Las islas invitadas* (1926), by Manuel Altolaguirre (Bernal Salgado 1995: 97–121).

Moreover, it is indeed impossible to interpret the Generation of '27 as vanguard without assigning the ultraists and creationists an essential role in its formation, and it seems unwise to approach Ultraism by establishing an impassable barrier with the Hispanic *Modernismo* advocated in Spain by Rubén Darío. The facts are unquestionable, and even though Guillermo de Torre wanted a radical departure from the modernists – he charged, for instance, the poetry of Adriano del Valle with suffering frequent “rubenean relapses”, which excluded the Sevillian from being considered ultraist “*per nati-vitatem*” (Torre 1925: 72–75) – the truth is that even the titles of the magazines where the ultraist vanguard appeared already reveal, until the appearance of *Ultra* in 1921, a quite explicit continuity as far as the modernist and symbolist universe is concerned: *Grecia*, *Los Quijotes*, *Cervantes* (or safeguarding the distances, the Ramonéan *Prometeo*, where the foundational texts of Futurism appear) are good examples of this. In fact, the chief ultraist apostle, Rafael Cansinos Assens, was, as we know, a modernist converted to the vanguard, but he never completely abandoned the turn-of-the-century traces present in many of his works.

This *continuum* paradigm is intensified if we consider the relationships between the writers on both sides of the Portuguese and Spanish frontier, and the reception and assimilation of Portuguese literature in Spain. One of the most significant examples of a possible methodological imbalance can be seen in the traditional vision drawing comparative lines between Fernando Pessoa and the Spanish poets of the Generation of '27, for the simple reason that both represented, as mentioned before, the crucial points in the vanguard literature in both countries, from a canonical point of view. However, not all of Pessoa's work is vanguardist (neither are, strictly speaking, all the collaborations that appeared in the magazine *Orpheu*, where the vanguard coexists with symbolist, decadentist or paulist contributions), and the parallelisms between Pessoa

the spirit of the Portuguese poet, safeguarding the distances within his work, was closer to the ultraist poets. However, the similarities between the '27 poets and the authors of the generation of *presença* are obvious, starting with the demand of its immediate antecedents through the course of the vanguard. The risk to assume this imbalance when building the national canon of each country (the first Portuguese poet of the Historic Vanguard does not have an analogous equivalent in Spain) has caused, for a long period, the conceptual inaccuracy that the Andalusian ultraist poets who were in contact with the Portuguese writer, Adriano del Valle, Rogelio Buendía and Isaac del Vando-Villar, failed to be considered by the historians of 20th century Spanish literature (Sáez Delgado 2011).

This circumstance is, undoubtedly, once more attached to the idea of a *continuum* and its rare implementation in our literary history. I also stated that it was not difficult to trace the modernist footprint in the Spanish Historic Vanguard, and we mentioned the names of the magazines where it was born. We could go further and provide a deeper analysis from an Iberian perspective. Eugénio de Castro, who introduced symbolism in the Peninsula, who managed to gather the support of Rubén Darío and Miguel de Unamuno, which is equivalent to saying the most visible literary movements of the Spanish poetry from the beginning of the century, was not solely admired by Francisco Villaespesa and Spanish modernists, whose aesthetic harmony with the poet from Coimbra was obvious. If we analyze the presence of Portuguese poets in Spanish magazines linked to Ultraism and the Historic Vanguard, like *Grecia* or *Cervantes*, our attention is drawn to the total lack of interest towards the work of the first Portuguese Modernism, as well as to the fact that the only repeated name is that of Castro, with exception of the magazine *Cosmópolis*, where Carmen de Burgos (Colombine) wrote, between 1920 and 1921, an interesting group of articles where, for example, the name of Mário de Sá-Carneiro, who committed suicide in 1916, already appeared.

Furthermore, the ultraist Rogelio Buendía published the book *Lusitania* in 1920. In *Viaje por un país romántico*, he narrates a train trip crossing the country of Camões from south to north, in which one of the most interesting episodes consists of the encounter that the Andalusian writer has in Coimbra with Eugénio de Castro, towards whom he expresses a profound admiration. This admiration was also shared by César González-Ruano (who had published in 1925 the mythic book of poems *Via ducto*) in his book from 1928 *Un español en Portugal*, where there is also a meeting with the symbolist poet in the form of an interview, and also Mauricio Bacarisse, that places the couple of protagonists of his 1921 novel *Los terribles amores de Agliberto y Celedonia* again in Coimbra to meet the “great narracian moat” (Sáez Delgado 2012: 90–94). That means that

the presence of Eugenio de Castro and his symbolism had remained in Spain throughout several decades and his footprint can be traced back to the work of various generations of Spanish writers, since even Gerardo Diego translated, sometime later, one of his most known poems, "Hernafrodita" (Diez de Revenga 2007: 158), providing one more fact in support of the idea of a heterogeneous *continuum*.

All this occurs at the same time as the reception that Teixeira de Pascoaes and his Saudosism had in Spain and, especially, in Catalonia or Galicia, and in the same year, 1918, in which the Ultraism was born, and the poet of Amaranite displayed his theories in a cycle of conferences helped by Eugenio d'Ors in Barcelona. Thanks to this work of mediation, as well as that of translation of Fernando Maristany and the critical allusions made by Ignasi de Ribera i Rovira and Andres Gonzalez-Blanco – who claimed for himself, in 1917, a certain Iberian, not solely Portuguese, saudosism in the pages of the magazine *Espírido-Barcelona* – the pantheistic and spiritual lyrical proposal of Pascoaes, Unamuno's friend, became very present among the Spanish poets who were not willing to accept gladly the 'French' ideas of modernism (Sáez Delgado 2008: 37–63).

All of this draws, as stated at the beginning, a plural map, multiple and dynamic, in which periods and aesthetic categories, generations, movements and currents overlap until they define a set in continuous movement, where there are still a few facts to be uncovered. However, we firmly believe that this vision of an Iberian continuum in the time of Modernism and the Vanguard helps, along with comparative tools, to reread the history of Spanish literature under a broader light, with new data that grants historical moments like the Historical Vanguard, which have often been neglected, their true importance, however humble. From this position we aim to define a truly more complex landscape, in constant change and full of diverse elements, with the ultimate hope that it is more faithful to the historical moment in which the Vanguard arose and to the cosmopolitan edge with which the Vanguard wanted to embed, in a more or less successful manner, into its own genetic code.

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PART 4

Intermedialities

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