

Julio Ramos

*Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*

Translated by John D. Blanco; foreword by José David Saldívar

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*Review by Idelber Avelar*

Julio Ramos's *Desencuentros de la modernidad en América Latina: Literatura y política en el siglo XIX* (1989), now published in English as *Divergent Modernities*, is one of those rare books that have changed the protocols, methods, and objects of an entire discipline. After *Desencuentros*, Latin American literature could no longer be analyzed without taking into account its role in the constitution of a network of power that linked writing, citizenship, and culture (the third term used in the prescriptive sense it has acquired in Latin American essayism). I do not suggest, of course, that these links were not investigated in Latin America before Ramos: in this sense his book clearly belongs to a radical tradition of which Angel Rama and David Viñas, among others, are culminating moments. Julio Ramos, however, not only takes the intellectual achievements of that generation to another level of theoretical and historiographic sophistication, he also departs from its still residually populist and idealist belief in literature as an expression of a Latin American being or essence (be it philosophically or sociologically defined) that in the writings of Rama and Viñas's generation was usually presumed to be given in advance of the literary text. Ramos, instead, targets a previous moment, namely, the very emergence of the category of "literature" as a moment in the constitution of that presumed Latin American essence. Instead of taking "Latin American identity" (*lo latinoamericano*) as a self-identical content, already given in advance and later sent to a search for forms of expression, Ramos posed a different problem: What if the very crafting of a hypostatized Latin Americanness was—in its systematic appeal to a literary tropology—inseparable from the very constitution of "literature" as a separate object, discourse, and discipline in Latin America? What if that "literature"—throughout its coming into being—dialectically reinforced the crafting of Latin America's identitarian hypostasis? The investigation of the processes through which this disciplinary operation has taken place in the past 150 years—in Latin American essayism, but also in fiction, poetry, chronicles, political writing, pedagogical practices—is only one of the

vast areas of research that *Divergent Modernities* opened up back in 1989. And this is simply one small measure of how extraordinarily important this book is.

It is true that these dialectical questions posed by Ramos would be unthinkable without the space opened up by Rama's use of the category of *letrado*, and the light Rama thus shed on the historical relation between writing and power in Latin America. However, Julio Ramos's reading demands a more nuanced concept: it is theoretically insufficient and deceptive, he argues, to presuppose an unbroken, historicist continuity in the category of *letrado*. While it is true that for Domingo F. Sarmiento, Andrés Bello, José Martí, and José Enrique Rodó the articulation of writing with some form of authority or authorization was at stake, what they all had in common in that regard was much too abstract, general, and superficial for the critic to use the concept of *letrado* identically to describe all of them. As Ramos argues, "To believe that Rodó as well as Sarmiento were *letrados* because the 'ideologizing function' was at work in both, or because both were public servants, does not take into account the different discursive fields that grounded their respective interventions" (62). The mapping of that multifaceted, historically evolving discursive terrain was the ambitious task that this book gave itself and accomplished admirably.

The first contrast established by Ramos is not between Sarmiento's modernizing, civilizing enterprise, fully launched in *Facundo* (1845), and Rodó's hypostatization of an antimercantile aesthetic realm in *Ariel* (1900). Ramos shows that already between Sarmiento and Bello, writing contemporaneously for a good couple of decades, a subtle differentiation of the intellectual field took place, one that has been obscured by the formulaic opposition (found in manuals, anthologies, and literary histories) between "a romantic Sarmiento attached to the spirit of life [and] the ascetic figure of Bello, guardian of forms" (23). Ramos unveils a more complex dialectic: while for Sarmiento to write was "to order the randomness of American 'barbarism'" (3)—in a complex process where the operation of writing was often described with the same adjectives ("untamed," "formless," "primitive physiognomy," and "willful audacity") used to qualify barbarism—Bello, on the other hand, *grammaticalized* the relationship between the "good" citizen and the polis. That is to say, Bello took part in a process in which writing as such already played a role, legitimizing itself amid an incipient autonomization and specialization that made Bello—for Ramos still an Enlightenment patrician much like Sarmiento—a writer who organized his discourse of self-legitimation through writing itself. This is why,

Ramos argues, one finds in Bello a concept of “writing well” that would have been unthinkable in Sarmiento’s still relatively undifferentiated field, where writing tended to be coextensive with (political) praxis. Whereas in Sarmiento writing was one with the ordering of barbarism (an operation in which, Ramos insists, “modernization” was not a metaphor or “an analogy between the field of discourse and the social order ‘reflected’ by it” [20], but something that only held weight in writing itself), in Bello the model of eloquence and proper language would come to fulfill another political role: it would, in itself, operate as a means of social differentiation and rationalization of the public sphere. Although one does not find in Bello the constitution of belles lettres as a field self-legitimated by an appeal to an immanent “poetic” space (as it would happen in the late nineteenth century), Ramos shows Sarmiento’s and Bello’s engagements with the political to have belonged to two different moments of an intellectual field in an uneven process of autonomization, incipiently observable in Bello.

But we must not allow our use of words such as *incipient* to imply a linear evolution toward autonomy, a historicist temptation that Julio Ramos admirably critiques and eludes in *Divergent Modernities*. This is in fact an extraordinary richness of Ramos’s work: he proceeds by systematically taking into account the virtual counterargument. He then incorporates and preempts that argument, not before extracting its moment of truth, so to speak, on his way to a (historically and theoretically) more nuanced formulation of the problem. Let us take, for example, the word *autonomization*: Ramos uses it with full awareness that it first described an aesthetic realm which, *in Europe*, emerged as a product of the separation of social spheres (moral, scientific, and aesthetic) studied in a tradition that runs from Max Weber to Jürgen Habermas, Peter Bürger, and beyond. Ramos not only takes note of the fact that in Latin America this process never led to a full, neat separation of spheres (that is, to accomplished autonomy), he also uses the concept with a good degree of skepticism, showing that not even in Europe did *autonomization* ever appropriately describe a fully realized exteriority and autonomy of one sphere vis-à-vis the other (in this case, the aesthetic vis-à-vis the political). This allows Ramos not to idealize a European paradigm in relation to which Latin American history could only be measured as faulty or incomplete. Instead, Ramos shows how the various appeals to an autonomous aesthetic space had the function of organizing and voicing a contradictory, at times panicked, reaction to turbulent transformations in the political field. The specific nature taken by that dialectics in Latin America was, for Ramos, what needed to be investigated.

*Divergent Modernities* is, then, a genealogy of “literature” as a mediator in that dialectics. It is a perennially vanishing mediator, however, since Ramos takes “literature”—like “autonomization”—to be a heterogeneous and contentious terrain, delimited by a term whose meaning is not given in advance. Indeed, in their struggle to stake out a properly literary realm, nineteenth-century *literatos* faced a contradiction that would take very specific forms in Latin America: literature’s self-legitimizing appeal included the defense of a space presumably threatened by modernization but which—Ramos’s analysis shows—was precisely made possible by that modernization (a process in which the newspaper would be a key element). This is a complex dialectic in which a discursive field, the literary, emerged precisely by opposing, and presenting itself as an alternative to, the very specialization, autonomization, and professionalization that accounted for its condition of possibility. This discursive struggle found a home in the Latin American chronicle, a genre extensively analyzed in *Divergent Modernities*. José Martí was, of course, the author of the work most richly and contradictorily traversed, and haunted, by these paradoxes.

For Ramos the chronicle was the hybrid and minor genre (in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s sense) that allowed emergent aesthetic subjects *both* to negotiate their movement toward the modern polis, the market, the anonymous city, *and* to preserve an “interior” space in which a protected, alternative source of value and sensibility could be postulated. Paradoxically, then, the “encounter with lower and antiaesthetic discourses in the chronicle made possible the consolidation of the emergent aesthetic field” (112). In Ramos’s reading it was the chronicle’s very flexibility as a genre, its very lack of discipline, that allowed it to play its disciplining role as an emplotment of order amid the urban chaos. Ramos’s magnificent readings of chronicles by Gutiérrez Nájera, Rubén Darío, Julián del Casal, Eduardo Wilde, Enrique Gómez Carrillo, and especially José Martí, explore in detail the various forms taken by this aporetic genesis of the literary in Latin America. These names indicate, in Ramos’s work, a number of possible variations on this highly ideologized conflict: from Gómez Carrillo’s or the early Darío’s aesthetics of luxury as an ideology of autonomization, which “transform[ed] the threatening signs of progress and modernity into a picturesque and aestheticized spectacle” (114), to Martí’s works, in which at least three positions struggled for supremacy, according to Ramos: (1) an affirmation of literary autonomy through a recourse to “style,” understood in opposition both to traditional belles lettres and to modern instrumental rationality; (2) a recognition of the risks entailed by autonomization,

which threatened to reify the aesthetic as a merely decorative realm; and (3) the employment of a civil rhetoric to counter the distance established by autonomization. The particular way in which Martí combined these *fragments*, taken from different codes, and the explosive political context in which he wrote, account for his privileged role in the narrative of *Divergent Modernities*.

By this point in *Divergent Modernities* Ramos has begun to develop, along with the genealogy of the literary in Latin America that he explored in the first half of the book, the initial hypotheses of a second, dialectically interrelated genealogy: that of Latin Americanism. From the first appeals to a specific Latin American difference that embraced “culture” (manifested incipiently as early as 1856, with Francisco Bilbao’s opposition of the “Latin” continent to its northern neighbor on that basis) to the ideology of a specifically “aesthetic” propensity of Latin America (turned pedagogical method under the influence of Rodó in the first three decades of the century), the trajectory of Latin Americanist discourse, of its coming into being, cannot be understood without a genealogy of literature in the region. The particularly culturalist matrix of Latin Americanism becomes, then, the object of Ramos’s genealogical inquiry, beginning with the relatively hybrid and mixed manifestations of that rhetoric in Martí, through the highly ideological defense of aristocratic culture in *ariélismo*, to the culturalist essayism of the twentieth century, from José Vasconcelos to Alfonso Reyes and Pedro Henríquez Ureña. Ramos offers not only a textual reading of these figures but also a historical interpretation constantly informed by a study of the evolution of reproductive technologies, the written press, the university, and the national states themselves.

Ramos’s framing of Martí is a courageous stance against a tradition that insisted on heroicizing Martí, or reading him as he read himself. Again Ramos delivers a hard blow to quietist, narcotic literary history. He tackles the contradictions of Martí’s discourse without necessarily recollecting them under the unified coherence of a hero or resolving them by resorting to the postulate of an anachronistic, premodern, “civil” order of discourse only possible in the still-colonial Cuba. The discarding of the heroic-psychological and the linear-historicist hypotheses allows Ramos to read Martí’s own allusions to a *previous* order of harmony presumably unsettled by modernization to be, in fact, a particularly *modern* attempt at legitimating the literary within an increasingly hostile market. As we know, in Martí’s text these allusions coexist with the struggle to find a certain usefulness, a pragmatic justification for literary writing within that

very market. Writing is often dramatized as a commodity with an increasingly embattled claim to exchange value. Ramos analyzes that predicament and shows how Martí tried to revalorize newly professionalized writing by frequently staging a “step back” from the urban chaos (and framing it with the strolling gaze of the flaneur). This phenomenology constructed an aesthetic subject who emerged precisely through his or her distance from the early manifestations of a mass culture perceived as chaotic and threatening. Much of the second half of *Divergent Modernities* is devoted to the genealogical tracing of that gaze in chronicles such as “Coney Island” and “Brooklyn Bridge.” By the time Ramos concludes chapter 9 (the final chapter of the original Spanish edition) with his reading of “Our America,” nothing short of a revolution in Martí scholarship, and Latin American criticism, has taken place.

Ramos approaches Martí aware of an important phenomenon: “Our America” delimits the field and the vocabulary with which one attempts to circumscribe it. A classic for over a century, it has come to embody the very constitution of the self that speaks in Latin American(ist) criticism. In that sense, it is a text upon which a critical, genealogical operation of denaturalization (which could unsettle the seemingly stable meaning of its terms) imposes itself with utmost urgency. *Divergent Modernities* is the book that has undertaken that task most courageously. This denaturalization does not imply that Ramos ever ceases to recognize the moment of truth in Martí’s anti-imperialist, antimercantile, and anti-interventionist politics, as the Cuban advanced them in “Our America” and elsewhere. The critique of imperialism and commodification is a powerful motif in Martí, and it establishes a legacy to which Julio Ramos lays claim in his writing. But the very real interventionist threats against which Martí wrote (“the tigers outside”) were, Ramos shows, the condition of possibility for the very invention of an “interior” (an untamed world of autochthony, the “tigers within”) that would define itself in opposition to that outside. In Ramos’s words, “The discourse of being would arm itself with the inside/outside dialectic, in a double movement that would serve to at once homogenize the interior—‘the house of our America’—and exclude the powerful ‘other’ whose threat in any case made the consolidation of the interior both possible and necessary” (255). According to Ramos, the operation of Martí’s essay is, then, one of “ordering” that interior by proposing an “art of good governance” that does not exhaust itself in its anti-imperialist and antimercantile vocation, for it also sets to itself the goal of naturalizing and homogenizing the representation of that interior (of “ourselves”). The anti-imperialist

vocation thus also coexists with (and is dialectically made possible by) “a formidable will to power” (264) that organizes Martí’s pedagogy and asserts a “redemptive, *auratic* power of literature” (263)—precisely the force capable of unifying, in Martí’s pedagogy, the heterogeneous space of the American soil. This particular project of restoring an auratic authority for literature is what begs critique, in Ramos’s view, insofar as it has made possible the consolidation of highly ideological versions of Latin Americanist discourse. In this sense, José David Saldívar’s rich and useful introduction to this translation can also be misleading. His emphasis on “subaltern modernities” (xiii), “divergent subalternity” (xiv), “subaltern cultural critique” (xv) presumably recuperable in Martí, contrasts with Ramos’s more dialectical understanding of Martí’s *construction* of that hypostatized subalternity, one that is founded, as Ramos argues, on “a formidable will to power.” Saldívar’s position, then, is not so much unconsciously antagonistic to Ramos’s as it is a *partial* rendering of it, one that only sees one half of Ramos’s dialectical analysis.

*Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Latin America* is a solid translation of Julio Ramos’s original work—although some of the translator’s decisions are questionable. Take, for example, the option of leaving the word *latinoamericanismo* unexplainably untranslated (and thereby adding to the very mystique deconstructed by Ramos), while the words *modernismo* and *modernista* are misleadingly rendered as “modernism” and “modernist,” without even the traditional footnote to explain the difference between the contrasting meanings of these words in the two traditions. These questionable decisions do not, however, take away from a beautiful work of translation that admirably renders Ramos’s complex, mobile prose in clear and elegant English.

In addition to a translation of Ramos’s original nine-chapter tour de force, and José David Saldívar’s introduction, this Duke volume includes two bonus chapters where Ramos further explores some of the themes developed in the original Spanish editions. These pieces, “The Repose of Heroes: On Poetry and War in José Martí” and “Migratories,” map out, respectively, the dilemma of politicization versus autonomization, as dramatized in Martí’s poetry, and the representation of the migratory movement in Martí (contrasted to the work of contemporary Nuyorican poet Tato Laviera). The volume also includes three valuable appendices: English translations of three classics by Martí, “Our America,” the “Prologue to *Poema del Niágara*,” and “Coney Island.” This, then, is a publication to be received with enthusiasm, for the English reader now has access to what

is arguably the most sophisticated reflection ever devoted to nineteenth-century Latin American literature. The field of Latin American criticism has not been the same since the publication of the original Spanish volume, and there is reason to believe that U.S. Latin Americanism—along with Latino studies, border studies, and other neighboring fields—will now profit immensely from the wide avenues of research opened up by this remarkable work. In a word, this is a book that, in spite of having been turned into a disciplinary classic by so many of us, has lost none of the unsettling, revolutionary freshness it displayed twelve years ago.