

Modernization, Feminism, and Delmira Agustini

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My research has long reflected a belief that even the most aesthetic or, to use a variation on the Spanish word, aestheticist (*esteticista*) of all literary movements is rooted in its socio-cultural context, a socio-cultural context that almost always reaches beyond national borders. The international factors that affected the development of Spanish American literary movements are particularly salient since the nineteenth century. During this period the cross currents of ideas, events, and inventions transcending national boundaries became swift and strong. In my last major study, I showed that *modernismo* arose as a confrontation with and a response to modernizing forces that swept across Spanish America as it entered the world economy. These forces, which came from all directions, transformed Spanish American life in the second half of the nineteenth century. While the growing confidence in technology, industrialization, science, and materialistic progress offered the basis for great optimism, it also created both a social and a spiritual crisis, the latter resulting from a loss of faith in traditional beliefs and a hunger for spiritual certainty. In that study, I proposed that not only the sense of loss and alienation felt by *modernista* writers resulted from international factors but that the responses that they formulated had also been influenced from abroad. There I focused, like most critics of Spanish American *modernismo* on European models. Though greatly affected by these models, *modernismo* goes beyond these trends to create an original, uniquely Spanish American literature in which the goals for language are dual, that of revealing profound realities concealed by the inflexibilities of scientific methods and the stultification of everyday life and that of providing insights into politics, power, and national identity.

For the culminating endeavor of the Fellows' Seminar that I helped co-direct, I want to underscore some of the ways that the seminar has affected my research. Most significantly, I wish to indicate how I have begun to look North as much as East to define the context in which Spanish American authors wrote. In this article, I will focus on Delmira Agustini, a late *modernista* and the first major female poet of twentieth-century Spanish America. Delmira Agustini is known almost as much for her short and tumultuous life as her creative and openly erotic verse. As you will recall,

Agustini was born in 1886 in Uruguay and published three volumes of verse by the age of twenty-eight, at which point she was killed by her ex-husband, whom she had taken as a lover. However provocative these biographical details may be, I will not concentrate on Agustini's life but on her poetry. In particular, I will explore the relationship between Agustini's innovative poetic discourse and the changing gender roles and sexual mores of the day. I will also examine the unusual way that Agustini's writing builds upon the tradition begun by earlier *modernistas* of questioning and critiquing predominant ideological and cultural conventions. These discursive conventions are found both in the language of nation-state formation that circulated at the turn of the century and within *modernista* poetry itself.

The sense of crisis to which *modernismo* offered a response resulted from the integration of Spanish America in the world economy and the opening of its borders not only to new modes of production but also to new ideas and images. In a recent article, Carla Giaudrone examines how the resulting social instability set into motion two opposing forces. The first was constituted by the established patriarchal authorities, who wielded power and controlled acceptability and participation in society. The second, countervailing force consisted of those who fell outside the limits set by the controlling authorities. As she sees it, *modernista* authors, writing in opposition to the dominant bourgeois perspective, wound up opening a cultural space for those excluded from social involvement. Significantly, however, *modernistas* tended to straddle these two groups. They may have given an opportunity for speech to the marginalized of society, that is, to the outsiders or to those whom Giaudrone labels "el otro," but they also maintained a strong desire to become fully incorporated into the ranks of the ruling class. This ambivalence is a disconcerting but undeniable feature of *modernismo*, one left unmentioned by Giaudrone. Her portrayal of the situation, nevertheless, goes to the heart of the issues of participation and privilege.

El otro, percibido como una amenaza al poder hegemónico, debe ser necesariamente controlado, anulado. Con tal fin son creados a partir de la segunda mitad del siglo XIX, con el auxilio de la ciencia y la religión, modelos culturales de mujer y ciudadano. La sexualidad pasa a considerarse un poder que escapa a la cultura racionalista su descontrol, un factor que conduce a la enfermedad, al gasto ocioso de energías y al deshonor familiar...El conjunto de estas identidades marginales contribuyó a desvigorizar la supremacía masculina en el aparato de poder y la virilidad como una de las causas esenciales de su dominio. La institución estatal de los "tiempos modernos" no estaba dispuesta a dejar lugar para otro deseo que no fuera el masculino.

El modernismo, en cambio, desde una postura que se expresa en contra del filisteísmo burgués encaramado en el poder, vuelve visible al otro, le ofrece, aunque condicionado, un espacio. (260)

This struggle over the language of personal and national self-representation is at the center of the far-reaching ideological readjustments that dominated Spanish American life at the end of the nineteenth century. It is part and parcel of the crisis ushered in by the shift toward positivism and its endorsement of utilitarianism, materialism, and progress. If progress meant modernization, Spanish American intellectuals were forced to consider how much of it they wanted and, if their countries were not achieving all that they desired, what were the roots of that failure. As Michael Aronna has shown, the language used to discuss these issues develops during the Enlightenment and in the recourse by thinkers like Kant to models in the biological sciences. The metaphor of maturation, through various intermediate steps and influences, is turned first into the inverse central trope of degeneration and decadence and then into one of disease (11-33). The policies and programs based on this way of thinking “permeated,” as Aronna points out, “the private and public spheres, rigidifying and antagonizing relations between the sexes, social classes and ethnic groups” (11).

It is over the role of sex in general and femininity in particular that the presentations by Aronna and Giaudrone come together. From the perspective of the ruling elites, sexuality and passion are deemed a threat to the well-being of the community, for they create distractions from the rational execution of the goals of the state. Femininity is similarly associated with irrationality, as well as with weakness and immaturity, aspects of human nature that were deemed in need of regulation if not eradication. *Modernismo* became the voice of the excluded, because it actively sought to open the door to the possibilities of the irrational and the spiritual, as well as the beautiful, the artistic, the anti-utilitarian. The inclusion of sexual references as a part of its counterdiscourse, results from of a number of factors that are not discussed by either Aronna or Giaudrone but that are equally significant.

It is important to remember that the recourse to the stories and imagery of sexual desire to challenge or affirm social conventions has operated quite consistently throughout the course of time. More specifically, as noted by Octavio Paz in *Los hijos del limo*, the exaltation of the natural order of things, especially sexuality, became for many romantics a means of by which they formulated a moral and political critique of civilization (56-60). For this very reason, *modernismo*'s adaptation of and incorporation of erotic tales and sexually charged language provide insight into its multiple and

complex goals, some of which are spiritual and some of which are political. The opening of a space for more marginalized individuals, including women, is an important by-product of *modernismo*'s answer to the predominant perspectives of its time.

Delmira Agustini obviously responded to this openness. Yet many other factors—some poetic and some socio-political—contributed to her ability to participate in the intellectual circles of the day.¹ The language that she uses, however, does not reflect the positivistic discourse that appears to have made her participation possible. It is, what I would characterize as an eroticized response to Rubén Darío.

The inroads of liberal thought that operated in opposition to the hegemonic, patriarchal premises that dominated life in nineteenth-century Spanish America were altering daily life and played a key role in the modernization process mentioned before. Along with the arrival of science and technology came new ideas about education, trade, language, and women. Along with the steamship, the railroad, the trolley, the dirigible, immunology, analytic chemistry, the telephone, the telegraph, the phonograph, and numerous other scientific and technological advances came progressive beliefs with regard to the nature and role of woman.² In addition to countless articles about the advantages of educating and employing women, there even appeared a few daring suggestions regarding the elimination of the double standard and the possibilities of free love.³

The sexual freedom that had been probed quite openly by the European decadent authors of the nineteenth century had received a mixed welcome in Spanish America. Many writers could not overcome their Catholic upbringing and their sense of guilt. Others sought to cloak overt sexuality in the language of religion and spirituality. Others steered clear altogether of these radical possibilities. The new “scientific” exploration of sexuality and feminism, however, took on a totally different guise. The new rational, analytic approach to female sexuality is illustrated in the following passage.

Admitiendo, como admitimos nosotros, la igualdad de los sexos, no

¹ Giaudrone notes: “Se trata de un grupo con relaciones interpersonales bastante más sólidas de lo que comúnmente se cree, cuyo intercambio de ideas se dio a través de la asistencia a centros culturales, la publicación en las numerosas revistas y periódicos que circulaban en la época y una importante relación epistolar.” The most famous among this tightly knit group are: Rodó, Reyes, Viana, Quiroga, Herrera y Reissig, de las Carreras, Vaz Ferreira, Agustini, and Sánchez, n. 4, 285.

² For an overview of the changes occurring in Spanish American during the end of the nineteenth century, see Glickman, *Fin del siglo*, 4-47.

³ See, for example, the article by Santiago Locascio published in *Germen* and quoted by Glickman in *Fin del siglo*, 331-332.

podemos negar a la mujer el mismo sentir del hombre. Sentada esta premisa, para nosotros importante, me pregunto: ¿podemos negar nosotros la misma libertad a la mujer de multiplicar sus sensaciones sexuales cohabitando con dos o más hombres? ¿Hoy nosotros, los emancipados, no nos sentimos aguijoneados por la necesidad de poseer dos o más mujeres? Pues bien, si admitimos esto, aceptemos también como lógico del deseo idéntico que pueda sentir la mujer.

Contradecir este razonamiento significa que el sujeto que discute está todavía embebido en la vieja doctrina de la superioridad del macho sobre la desgraciada hembra. (Santiago Locascio, originally published in *Germen* in Buenos Aires, reprinted in Glickman, *Fin de siglo*, 332)

For many the model for these changes was the United States, which, depending on the perspective taken, was either the enlightened guide or the inspired devil. One of strong supporters of the ideas coming from the United States was Clorinda Matto de Turner. Perhaps best known as the author of *Aves sin nido*, she established several journals throughout Peru. In Buenos Aires, she founded *Búcaro americano* and became the director of the Escuela Comercial de Mujeres, which was created during the last decade of the nineteenth century by the Ministro de Instrucción Pública de la Argentina (Glickman, *Fin de siglo*, 26). In an article published in *Búcaro americano* in 1896, she cautiously points to the United States as a paradigm for the changes that could eventually reach Spanish America.

No buscaremos en la patria de Washington el lago plácido para beber las noticias sobre el progreso intelectual de la mujer americana; que allá todo es grandioso: más de cuatro mil empleadas en el servicio civil del gobierno; más de tres mil periodistas, escritoras y traductoras; cerca de cuatro mil empleadas en las notarías, en los bancos y casas comerciales, todo el cuerpo docente educacionista del estado, fuera de las que ejercen la cirugía y la medicina....[E]l puente levadizo, que cerraba la entrada de la mujer al palacio encantado del saber, del trabajo y de la fortuna, ha caído derribado para siempre por las exigencias de la época y la protección de los hombres.” (Quoted in Glickman, *Vestales del templo azul*, 110-111)

Another example of how the United States became associated, at least in the press, with the pragmatic and rationalist model for the treatment of women appears in an article under the by-line of Eva Angelina. She writes: “El día en que el varón se convenza de que la mujer ilustrada, lejos de ser inútil para el hogar, no sólo la realza sino que su beneficio se hace extensivo hasta los que la rodean, tendremos leyes que nos protejan como

las de los Estados Unidos de Norteamérica” (quoted in Glickman, *Vestales*, 106).

Besides receiving the news of progress made in the United States, writers like Agustini were exposed to ideas that were taking root within Uruguay and other Spanish American countries. In particular, political, social, and economic changes under José Batlle y Ordóñez (president from 1903 to 1907 and from 1911 to 1915) provided fertile ground for the development of feminist tendencies and the support of free love. As Christine Ehrick has pointed out, the workers’ movement in Montevideo produced an anarchist press in which “abundaron artículos relativos a la opresión de la mujer y la necesidad de subvertir la estructura burguesa de la familia” (231). In response to traditional marriages, these writers proposed the option of “free love,” which some even went so far as to suggest was related to women’s rights to sexual pleasure (Ehrick, 231).

These liberal ideas might have found a more receptive environment in Uruguay than in other Spanish American countries because of the weakened position of the Catholic Church.⁴ Nevertheless, the openness described lasted only a short time on the social scene in Uruguay, before being suppressed by the patriarchal establishment. For Agustini, however, its imprint seems to have continued and combined with the sexually charged language and images of earlier *modernista* writers. Giaudrone goes so far as to suggest that the *modernismo* practiced in Uruguay at the turn of the century is unique in the way that it situates the body at the center of its poetics, sexualizing writing (262).

This tendency is highlighted by Herrera y Reissig’s *El pudor. La cachondez*, which was written between 1901 and 1902 but which remained unpublished until 1992. These two sections of what was to be a larger work called *Los nuevos charrúas*, referring to the native Americans of Uruguay, contain explicit, outrageous, ironic commentaries on the hypocritical social

⁴ Russell H. Fitzgibbon indicates three historic or demographic factors that contribute to this situation: “effective Spanish colonization did not begin until the eighteenth century, by which time the religious fervor of the earlier generations and centuries had in considerable measure atrophied; during the colonial period Uruguay remained largely an ecclesiastical appendage of Buenos Aires, and its intensity of spiritual development and devotion was correspondingly diminished...In the second place, the revolutionary period was characterized by a large influx of foreigners, especially English and French, who were either non-Catholic or only nominally Catholic. Third, the large immigration beginning late in the nineteenth century, while it came in great part from Catholic countries, represented social and economic strata which were often of less than fervent attachment to the Church” (231). Fitzgibbon goes on to explain that Batlle contributed to Uruguay’s distance from the Catholic Church, for early on he developed a skeptical attitude toward it and its beliefs (213-215).

and sexual behavior of both men and women. As the editors of the 1992 edition make clear, this writing reflects “un particular impulso erótico que briosamente recorrió el ambiente cultural del novecientos montevideano” (14-15). A brief example of what this work offers in terms of revealing a less well recognized side of Uruguayan life as well as of the *modernista* movement comes from the section entitled “La cachondez,” in which Herrera y Reissig describes with gusto the unconventional pleasures in which certain female contemporaries indulged.

Por lo que se refiere a la cachondez y a lo que con ella reza,...[l]as mujeres se dividen en histéricas-masturbadoras (que despedazan velas), en consolatrices (que usan consoladores comprados en los de Miller), en homífogas (que se comen a los maridos), en uterinas (que connubian con los sirvientes, con los cocheros y con los niños), en canidólatras (que viven con perritos amaestrados), en tortilleras (que cohabitan con hermanas de clítoris desarrollados, amigas marimachos), en buscadoras (que van a las amuebladas), y en prostitutas (las de la calle Santa Teresa).

Herrera y Reissig ends this short section with a typically ironic note: “Libertinos no hay más que tres; uno se halla en Buenos Aires. Amantes, no alcanzan a media docena. Concubinas abundan en todas las clases” (124-125).

Though *Los nuevos charrúas* was not published at the time, what I quote reflects the attitudes that permeated the literary circles at the time that Agustini was beginning to write and may have facilitated her interaction with other writers. It certainly influenced her linguistic options. The sexualized language that is associated with Agustini’s writings does not, however, appear in her poetry immediately. It develops, I believe, in and through her literary dialogue with Rubén Darío, with whom she maintained a correspondence and whom she set up as a mentor, model, and even eroticized other. All the while, she sustained the social “persona” of “La Nena,” the image of the infantilized female which would meet with public approval.

My current work sets out to elucidate this new poetic discourse of female liberation through careful analysis of Agustini’s poetry. My research shows that Agustini sets up sexual behavior as a way of appropriating Darío without surrendering herself to his work. As has been explored in other studies, such as Girón Alvarados’s *Voz poética y máscaras femeninas en la obra de Delmira Agustini*, Agustini struggles to find a place for herself, a “poetic voice,” in the no-[wo]man’s land between the assimilated patriarchal discourse of the day and her own sense of self as a woman and

poet (3). While critics have repeatedly underscored the growing sexualization of her language not only as a breakthrough for Hispanic poetry but also for female writers, I believe an important feature of this development has been overlooked. Agustini, more than simply coming to affirm in her poetry her sexual nature and rejecting the limitations placed upon her by traditional views of women, sets up a creative conceit to deal with her personal “anxieties of influence.” She chooses a sexual model to combat the sense of weakness and ineffectuality suggested by imitation. She turns herself into a seductress and a partner and, in this way, rewrites from a female perspective much of the sexual images that run throughout Darío’s work. It is an imaginative leap influenced by her immediate socio-cultural and literary context. It is a response to the strong male patterns that surrounded her and, in an unconnected but contemporaneous coincidence, parallels Oswald de Andrade’s recourse to the language of cannibalism to provide a striking new metaphor for dealing with European cultural hegemony in Brazil.

Turning cultural stereotypes on its head, Andrade’s “cannibalism” exalted transgression against patriarchal society and extolled Primitivism.⁵ Attacking the vices of what passed for civilization, Andrade held that “[t]he spirit refuses to conceive the spirit without its body” and proposed spontaneity and instinct as the factors by which Brazil’s social, economic, and cultural evolution should be judged (Pontiero, 251-252). Perhaps more to the point, the Brazilian Modernists redefined themselves through the central metaphor of devouring assimilation through which the new body of “native originality” came into existence. Through this powerful turn of phrase, they were no longer dependent imitators but rather resourcefully aggressive creators.

I am certainly not saying that Agustini was influenced by Andrade and the Brazilian Modernists, but Agustini’s response parallels Andrade’s. Writing at about the same time (the “Manifesto Antropófago” was published in 1928) both authors were trying to find an assertive way of addressing the crushing power of cultural influences of established arrangements. Agustini, for her part, does not consume Darío but she does not surrender to his power either. She resists playing the role of the “female writer” and she resists the subservience that would have been expected of her as a woman and as a disciple. She enters into a literary relationship that was made possible, at least in part, by the political discourse of the day, a discourse that gave

⁵ For this discussion I am indebted to two chapters from the *Cambridge History of Latin American Literature*, the first “The Literary Historiography of Brazil” and the second “Brazilian Poetry from Modernismo to the 1990s” by Benedito Nunes and Giovanni Pontiero, respectively.

women a new relationship to male hegemony.

This stance goes a long way toward explaining a number of issues that have plagued critics since Agustini began to be acknowledged as a major literary force. Critics have struggled to reconcile her public persona as “La Nena” with the overt eroticism of her poetry. What I am proposing is that the image that she sought to project in public in no way should be expected to correspond to what she aspired to address in her poetry. Recognizing that at least some of the sexuality of her poems is a way of writing herself into the *modernista* canon reveals the fruitlessness of bouncing back and forth between poet and public persona. Neither simply a reflection of inner desires nor a portrayal of personal activities, Agustini’s female voice speaks to an effort to redefine, through language, what women can seek to achieve.

While there is in this endeavor a transcendent vision, it is not the type of transcendence that has been offered as an explanation for Agustini’s aggressive sexuality. Critical appeals to the traditions of mysticism appear most often as an attempt to neutralize her lustful evocations and bring them into accord with the image of “La Nena.” By the same token Agustini’s sexual imagery does not fall within the erotic mystical tradition epitomized by Darío’s recourse to esoteric visions of androgyny, which, for all intents and purposes, is converted by Darío from a vision of fusion into one of male domination. Quite the contrary, Agustini’s stance provides an assertive, eroticized answer to patriarchy in general and to Darío in particular. In this way it presents a dynamic metaphor for female creativity that goes beyond the “mad woman in the attic” of Gilbert and Gubar or the Oedipal structures of Bloom. As Gilbert and Gubar have recognized, authorial insistence upon the link between maleness and creativity undergirds the recourse to the Oedipal language of family ties to define the relationship between poets (6). Agustini answers the language of male authority and male creativity. In doing so, she speaks for a new type of female poet, one that is personally and artistically self-affirming, inspired by factors that crisscross the entire hemisphere.

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