

THE GEOMETRY OF DEVELOPMENT AND TRAVEL  
IN SPANISH AMERICAN MODERNISMO:  
DARÍO'S *MOMOTOMBO* REVISITED

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Columbus's outward voyages some five hundred years ago may be seen as setting up a geometry based on a developed centre and an undeveloped periphery. The centre is where subsequent voyages are formulated and financed; it is the place where travellers from many peripheral points meet and exchange goods and tales; it is where real history is felt to happen. The periphery, on the other hand, is the horizon never reached, sometimes felt to be close but, remaining untouched, possessing only the history projected on it from the centre. These two general terms form a geometry in the sense that, over and above geographical impediments, they function as minimal points of reference enabling travellers to say where they are, where they have come from and where they hope to be going. Although the geometry of development has never been the only abstraction historically available, it certainly remained dominant through to the end of the nineteenth century and is in many fields still of unquestioned validity today. My concern, however, is with certain literary attempts to contest its basic terms.

At the time of Spanish American Modernismo, Paris was broadly synonymous with the centre of cultural development, just as the periphery was considered relatively close to the American republics. Cultural history was felt to be difficult to make in Spanish America. As Jean Franco has put it, "What Europe saw as the unlimited horizon was for Spanish America the closed circle. There was nowhere for them to go." (13). Franco interestingly suggests that this proximity to the periphery led to a spiritual involution characteristic of Modernista writing. Unfortunately, it is not difficult to show that Modernistas did in fact have somewhere to go and were by no means trapped in a historical dead end. Most simply, they went from peripheral points to the European centre, where they tended to reproduce the European history of their origins.

I hope that brief analysis of one symbolic example of this process—Rubén Darío's poetic reference to the Nicaraguan volcano Momotombo—will indicate why Modernismo was not as naively Romantic as it is sometimes argued (as in, for example, a 1967 paper by Donald Shaw). Far from suffering from chronic belatedness, Modernismo effectively proposed many of the regional bearings that were to become important for twentieth-century Spanish

American writers who, similarly navigating by reference to development, have also attempted to define a regionality able to withstand the polarisation of centre and periphery.

The following models should account for the significance of Momotombo within Darío's text, then with reference to the model of a broader melting pot supported by the Modernistas' voyages towards the centre, and finally in contradistinction to the competing geometry of a developing "Latin" America.

### **The significance of Momotombo**

Published in his *Canto errante* of 1907, Darío's poem "Momotombo" begins with a description of the poet's arrival in Managua some twenty-five years earlier, when he was fifteen years old:

El tren iba rodando sobre sus rieles. Era  
 en los días de mi dorada primavera  
 y era mi Nicaragua natal.  
 De pronto, entre las copas de los árboles, vi  
 un cono gigantesco, "calvo y desnudo", y  
 lleno de antiguo orgullo triunfal.

The huge form seen between the trees is Momotombo, a volcano Darío values not only for of its perfect unforested shape but also because of its pre-Columbian name. It is a traveller's point of reference from an ancient geometry, a point that appears to resist some kind of post-Columbian intrusion:

Cuando las Babilonias del Poniente  
 en purpúreas catástrofes hacia la inmensidad  
 rodaban tras la augusta soberbia de tu frente,  
 eras tú como el símbolo de la Serenidad.

This all sounds very majestic, but I believe the text itself is far from clear. Just who are these Western Babylons with their purple catastrophes? The significance projected on Momotombo cannot fully be gleaned from what Darío has to say; this poem cannot stand by itself; it requires the tracing of references to several foreign voices that the poet cites alongside the volcano:

Ya había yo leído a Hugo y la leyenda

que Squire le enseñó. [ . . . ]

¡Momotombo!—exclamé—. ¡Oh nombre de epopeya!  
 Con razón Hugo el grande en tu onomatopeya  
 ritmo escuchó que es de eternidad.

The story of an arrival in Managua thus necessarily detours through Victor Hugo and an anecdote from nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxon geography. The young poet's discovery of Momotombo as pre-Columbian resistance had apparently not been made from a train as it rolled towards the centre, but in an even more peripheral situation, from a book sent some years previously from a Romantic centre of centres: the "calvo y desnudo" with which Darío originally describes Momotombo had been translated from "Oh vieux Momotombo, colosse chauve et nu", a verse found in Hugo's *La légende des siècles* of 1859, just as Hugo himself had found the story of Momotombo in the travel accounts of the American E. G. Squier (not Squire), published in New York in 1853. Here is the text Hugo translated from Squier, necessary for an understanding of Darío's reference to purple catastrophes on the volcano:

Le baptême des volcans est un ancien usage qui remonte aux premiers temps de la conquête. Tous les cratères du Nicaragua furent alors sanctifiés, à l'exception du Momotombo, d'où l'on ne vit jamais revenir les religieux qui s'étaient chargés d'aller y planter la croix.

The volcano's resistance was thus more than imaginary: conquering and colonising priests were in the habit of climbing to the top of extinct or dormant volcanoes, setting up crosses and baptising the craters with good Christian names. Momotombo, however, could not be climbed and therefore could not be baptised. Hence the retention of its pre-Columbian name and its symbolic resistance to subsequent development. Hugo's interpretation of this legend makes Momotombo explain the reasons for not accepting the new god: it seems that the volcano was none too keen on pre-Columbian religion, but when it saw the Spanish Inquisition in Lima, it realised that the conquering religion was just as cruel:

J'ai regardé de près le dieu de l'étranger,  
 Et j'ai dit : — Ce n'est pas la peine de changer.

In saying that one religion is just as bad as another, Hugo uses Momotombo as a neutral intercultural space for the condemnation of both. Darío has no qualms about adopting this intercultural space, but his attitude is far from one of revulsion: he is instead fascinated with all that a young poet of fifteen could associate with such a legend:

fábula, cuento, romance, amor  
 de conquista, victorias de caballeros bravos,  
 incas y sacerdotes, prisioneros y esclavos,  
 plumas y oro, audacia, esplendor.

The terms are certainly distanced as youthful imaginings, but they fill the same intercultural space as Hugo's condemnation of two religions. The problem of Momotombo is not so much with the actual content that the poets invest in this space, but with the process of its very construction as an apparently symmetrical confrontation of cultures.

This is clearly not a text about Nicaraguan originality or European superiority. It is instead about the references and points of reference available for confusing such terms. Paradoxically, in describing a symbol of his peripheral regionality, Darío has translated from the literary language of a centre distanced in both time and space. He does not claim to have discovered or revealed anything more than what Hugo or Squier discovered before him. More importantly, he chooses to heighten rather than hide the role played by the centre in his formulation of a regional symbol. Darío is not at all perturbed that a Nicaraguan should have to discover the legends of his own country by reading a Frenchman who had read a North American.

This paradox is by no means exceptional in its historical context. In the roughly contemporaneous text *Viaje a Nicaragua* of 1909 Darío takes almost perverse pleasure in recounting how his country's main natural resource of the time—coffee plants—had come from an Arabian seed cultivated in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, sent as a young bush to Martinique and, from that ancestry, to Nicaragua in 1845. That is, the most valuable part of Nicaraguan nature had previously been in some way French. Or, more exactly, what was of most value in Nicaragua had previously been evaluated in terms of a more developed centre. The significance of Momotombo was essentially no different.

### **Momotombo as melting pot**

The intercultural function of Darío's Momotombo is thus broadly to resolve polarisation. This is supported by the general semantic structure of Darío's text: the volcano is peripheral yet of a significance discovered in the centre; it resists priests calmly but retains inner fire; it gives direction as a point of reference but, as a volcano, is also a point of dispersal for the mind of the young poet:

¡Con un alma volcánica entre la dura vida,  
 Aquilón y Huracán sufrió mi corazón,

y de mi mente mueven la cimera encendida  
Huracán y Aquilón!

This chiasmal unity of opposites brings together several names of significance, all positioned in the same axiological heights:

Tu voz escuchó un día Cristóforo Colombo;  
Hugo cantó tu gesta legendaria. Los dos  
fueron, como tú, enormes, Momotombo,  
montañas habitadas por el fuego de Dios.

The volcano comes to symbolise an all-embracing continuity of historical greatness which, if the sequence of listeners is extended in time, should logically include Darío himself as a further "mountain inhabited by the fire of God". Greatness, suggests Darío, is above partisan localism, just as he himself would rise above his undoubtedly mixed origins: "¿Hay en mi sangre alguna gota de sangre de África, o de indio? Pudiera ser, a despecho de mis manos de marqués." (1896: 762) This same logic would eventually make Momotombo a melting pot uniting the pagan pre-Columbian past with a fantasised literary aristocracy complete with European titles. But it remains an uneasy unity, formulated in painfully nebulous terms.

Melting pots should ideally absorb all points of reference other than themselves. This is what I think Darío tries to do in "Momotombo" and in the *Canto errante* in general. Having recognised and cited the centre as the origin of the periphery, having effectively annulled the distance between the two, he is virtually claiming, as has Luisa Valenzuela, that "todos los lugares son iguales". Such a statement must radically do away with the geometry of development, making the poet a perpetual traveller guided only by subjectivity. Darío did indeed become an inveterate wanderer; the actual geographical location of writers has indeed become mostly irrelevant to twentieth-century literature. But I do not believe that post-Modernist placelessness was the immediate outcome of the Modernista melting pot, nor that indifference to region is an immediate result of highly mobile subjects. The movements of writers may yet provide further lines able to locate Momotombo. Some more concrete thought is required.

The voyages of Darío, the exemplary Modernista, may be summarised as a progressive movement from the minor centres of Managua then Santiago de Chile to the major centre of the Paris-Madrid axis, after which his itinerary is that of a wanderer. Despite Jean Franco's argument about the periphery, it was only when the European centre had been reached that the writer found he had nowhere to go. The *Canto errante* is the song not of a first arrival in Managua but of the mature Modernismo which, in 1907, was adopting an outward gaze

destined to mark future movements in Spanish American letters.

Four general parameters may be abstracted from these voyages towards the centre:

— First, the progression started from a position of self-conscious provincialism which became a lasting feeling of inferiority. Manuel Ugarte, who was a member of the group that established itself in Paris at the turn of the century, describes these voyages not in terms of a revelation but as the "éxodo general" of a "generación malograda, vencida" (7-8). He goes on to confess that "nosotros eramos anónimos 'rastas'", adding that "esta sensación de inferioridad aparente, por encima de las equivalencias, la tuvo Darío hasta el fin." (25)

— Second, this felt inferiority was collective, mostly impeding effective integration with writers from other backgrounds and thus bringing Spanish Americans together as a group within the central metropolis. At a time of relatively little cultural communication between the Spanish American republics, this meeting in the centre was of extreme importance for images of the periphery. As the director of the Cuban national archives complained in 1912, Spanish Americans were reluctant to read locally published works, ". . . y en el caso extremo de tener que aceptarse algo de América, algún fruto de latinoamericano, deberá antes ser tamizado por Garnier, por Michaud, por Ollendorff." (Alcover 61). European publishing houses held considerable sway over what was considered of literary value in Spanish America, making the journey to the centre a necessary step if one was to be read near the periphery. To write for their compatriots, many Spanish Americans had to become expatriates.

— Third, the fact that Spanish Americans had to publish within a cosmopolitan milieu gave rise to what might be termed mutual exoticisation. At the same time as they had to live as impoverished journalists conforming to the myths of the Belle Epoque so as to invent and sell the innumerable "Notas de París" sent to Spanish America and Spain, they also had to reinvent their own origins so as to live up to European expectations. The most successful propagandist in both these directions was perhaps Gómez Carrillo, who lived in Paris from the early 1890s and, almost alone, got to know other Parisians like Wilde, Merrill, Moréas and even Nordau. Ugarte gives the measure of Carrillo's success in Paris:

—Ce brave Monsieur Cariló—me dice un parisino 100/100—il a tué dans son pays des tigres, des buffles et des alligators; mais, c'est épatant, à la salle d'armes il a l'air d'un mousquetaire. Nous l'aimons bien, Monsieur Cariló . . . (137)

If the price of acceptance was the placing of buffaloes and tigers in Guatemala, magical realism may have started early.

— Fourth, the fact that many Spanish American writers of the new century were living in Europe meant that there was virtually no time gap with respect to their cultural references.

Darío's citing of Hugo was, in 1907, the result of a very conscious selection. This could not have been true in 1882, when Hugo and the Romantics were the only poets available to the fifteen-year-old Darío. Nor could it have been entirely valid in 1888, when the journalistic milieu of Santiago had preselected the Parnasse as the dominant influence on the author of *Azul* . . . . But in 1907 Darío was aware of the later developments of Symboliste poetry; he had written on Mallarmé; he was prepared to use liberal irony in the construction of poetic form and personal identity. There can be no suggestion that his 1907 reference to the Hugo of 1859 put him forty or fifty years behind progressive aesthetics. In fact, this elective influence was entirely in keeping with the direction taken by the major French poets of the 1910s. At the same time as the vitalist poetry of Jammes, Claudel, Samain and Gregh was leading to a very positive appraisal of Hugo (Décaudin 151), Darío resurrected one of the major influences on his youth. The centre was aesthetically simultaneous with the Nicaraguan's regionality.

These four parameters—felt inferiority, non-integration, mutual exoticisation and referential simultaneity—may be used to measure the regionalist values of Darío's Momotombo beyond that of a simple melting pot. It becomes especially significant that Darío interprets the volcano's intercultural space as a place of heroic greatness rather than religious decadence; it is important that he insists on integration and yet positions the site of integration on the American side of the Atlantic; he is unashamed about reproducing mutual exoticisation; he makes no attempt to hide reference to the active role played by the centre in Spanish American cultural transmission. In 1907, Darío's return to Momotombo would appear to have been of its age. But what was it then saying about the development geometry of its age? In what conceptual framework was development at that time taking place?

### **A mountain is also a mountain**

It is well known that the concept of "Latin" America was originally of French invention, first promoted by the economist Michel Chevalier after 1861 and long remaining inseparable from French projects for the economic and political development of Central and South America. Spanish Americans began to adopt the term around the time of the Cuban War against Spain, when it was convenient to seek cultural roots broader than those of the more direct coloniser. The concept attained further justification soon afterwards, as the rival power became not Spain but the United States. "Latin" America was thus a space defined through negativity, excluding pre-Columbian America, playing down Hispanic colonisation and confronting Anglo-Saxon domination. This negativity is no doubt why a recent Spanish commentator, writing in Madrid, has referred to the concept as "una América Latina empañada de sentido racial o racista e inseparable de una ideología católica" (Gallego Morell), arguing that the French term has functioned as a deviation from the hard realities of true history. It seems that,

in this respect, real history continues to be written in Paris and Madrid.

Darío's Momotombo could no doubt be taken as a symbol of an America able to accept both French and Spanish history, both Columbus and Hugo, without racial exclusion, without abstraction from colonisation and certainly without Catholic hegemony. It could be read as a reasonable historical response to the notion of Latin America, avoiding negative terms by incorporating so many diverse elements that its melting pot, deprived of concrete enemies, becomes difficult to pin down and name.

Is Momotombo then a kind of exploded regionality, on the model of Latinity but pushed to the limits of humanity?

Such an interpretation would be possible. But a mountain is also a mountain. And there are a limited number of things that a person can do with a mountain.

Like the Spanish priests, Romantics like Rousseau, Schiller, Novalis, Wordsworth or Lamartine would have tried to climb Momotombo, or would have at least approached directly and on foot. Theirs was a centered subjectivity given to scaling heights in order to look out over a region under some kind of timeless aesthetic control. Such would be the natural region, passively conforming to the terms of centre and periphery defining the geometry of development.

But Darío's poetic subjectivity is not primordially centered; it does not seek to gaze straight out towards the distant sublime or over the locally undeveloped. Instead, his subjectivity passes next to the mountain, in a train, in a remembered country, and with a geometry defined by references to foreigners. This is no longer a simple story of development, nor could it be a simple melting pot, an official historical subdivision or a post-Modernist placelessness. Momotombo is not a kind of intercultural meeting place that needs to be named or conceptualised. It is rather the horizon from which priests from the centre do not return; it is the ultimate periphery that finds its negativity in merely consuming the history projected onto it. This, I think, is the function of Momotombo as a questioning of development geometry. The volcano remains, in itself, a silent objective point external to all references that locate a world known, subsumed and available for transformation. However, unlike death, it does not annul mobility. It is simply a point external and to the side of the subject in movement, manifesting no more than substantiality and providing orientation only in the negativity of its silence. Such is the fascination of Darío's Momotombo as a figure of radically contestational regionality.

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When I presented these models as a very schematic talk, I found myself drawing a figurative

mountain and commenting that it could be seen as a phallus, breast or womb, I didn't really care which. There are days when recycled Lacanisms become too much, when I have to declare that not everything can be covered by the adventures of the subject analysed into gender. When my comment was duly objected to, I then found myself saying rather more than I had come to say: that the radical criticism of our day should find some base in ecology, and that a mountain may well be a phallus, breast or womb, but it is also a mountain, of external substance that can say a silent no to whatever struggle, whatever religion or whatever heroism we attempt to enact upon it. When a Momotombo says no to our subdivisions and transformations, allowing the renaming traveller no return, development has reached its most radical contestation, and travelling poets like Hugo and Darío may recognise cause for careful reconsideration of our bearings.

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