

## ***Introduction***

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**N**o other accident in history has had a greater impact on the Latin American literary and artistic world. The Avianca 001 flight was a Boeing 747 scheduled to travel from Paris to Bogotá via Madrid. It had been delayed for about an hour and twenty minutes as the plane awaited the arrival of some passengers joining them from a Lufthansa flight and swelling the number of passengers to 169.<sup>1</sup> Uruguayan critic Ángel Rama and his wife, art historian and fiction writer Marta Traba, apparently boarded the plane together with Peruvian author Manuel Scorza, who like them was residing in Paris, the three en route to the first “Encuentro de Cultura Hispanoamericana” (Congress on Spanish American Culture) in Colombia.<sup>2</sup> After the congress, Scorza planned to spend the holidays with his children in Peru, as he had told them over the phone the day before. Coincidentally, Avianca airline’s inflight magazine, *El Mundo al Vuelo* (The World on the Fly), contained a short story by Cristina Peri Rossi about time, one of Rama’s obsessions while in exile. “El tiempo todo lo cura” (Time Heals All Wounds) is the very brief and allegorical tale of a man who goes to a pawnshop literally to buy time. The narrator needs it to heal some psychological “wounds” he received after ending a romantic relationship. At that moment, a woman enters the store wishing to sell all or almost all of her time, as she does not know what to do with it. The man buys a good portion of the woman’s time but declines an invitation

to spend time with her, deciding to use his newly acquired “empty time” to heal his wounds.<sup>3</sup>

Another congress invitee living in France was Mexican novelist Jorge Ibarguengoitia. He and his wife, English painter Joy Laville, had left Mexico in 1980; after teaching for a year at Rutgers University, they moved to Paris.<sup>4</sup> Ibarguengoitia had initially considered declining the invitation because he wanted to stay in France to work on his new book *Isabel cantaba* (Isabel Used to Sing). As on most planes, the sounds related to the takeoff frightened some passengers, but the flight to Madrid was uneventful. In the cockpit, captain Tulio Hernández, a pilot with over thirty years’ experience, contacted the Spanish communication center at Paracuellos around 11:31 p.m. and was given permission to enter the airspace. A few minutes later, Hernández spoke to Magdaleno García, an employee of Avianca at Madrid’s Barajas Airport, who informed him that he and his copilot would be replaced with a different crew on arrival. The news probably surprised them; Hernández was anxious to get back to Colombia, where his wife had recently undergone surgery. At Barajas, another group of writers and critics invited to the congress were waiting to board the plane: Luis Rosales, Guillermo Díaz-Plaja, José Varela Ortega, Carlos Murciano, Conrado Blanco, Ricardo Gullón, and José García Nieto. The skies were clear and there was little traffic that night. Inside the plane, the only incident was a woman needing extra oxygen. After that, the flight attendants were able to take their seats for landing. Some passengers thought the plane was going faster than normal as it approached the Madrid airport but, like the frightening sounds heard at takeoff, this might have been another symptom of anxiety about flying. In the cockpit, the captain set the altitude alert to 2,382 feet, instead of the 3,282 feet he should have entered. The transposition of the first two numbers caused the plane to approach the area lower than it was supposed to. The Boeing 747 had a GPWS (Ground Proximity Warning System) that alerted the pilots to the mistake. But Hernández ignored voice alerts asking him to “pull up,” or saying “terrain,” indicating that the plane was about to collide with the ground, and answered only “bueno, bueno” to the instruments’ warnings.<sup>5</sup> In the first impact, the landing gear and part of the right wing hit a hill. Some passengers noticed that one engine caught fire. The plane turned sharply to the right and hit a second hill three seconds later. It then broke in pieces with the main section upside down, which made escaping more difficult. Only 11 out of the 192 people on board survived.

After the accident, there was an outpour of publications about Rama written by the most important intellectuals in the region. There were articles mourning his death, recounting anecdotes, remembering his influence as a

cultural promoter, and praising his critical work. However, for a long time little analysis of his work was published. One might argue that the tragedy had the unexpected effect of delaying a critical reception of his work. Rama's passing left scholars with a few questions about the future directions of his research, about how his posthumous books fit in relation to the rest of his work, and so on. Even during the 1980s and 1990s—the “age of theory” in literary studies—when there was a renewed attention to how historical and personal circumstances influence the creation of theoretical concepts—scholars viewed Rama's texts as individual islands. His articles were often quoted for their insights into, for example, the gaucho genre, the politics of publishing behind the Latin American Boom, the literary representation of dictators, and so on. The first serious attempts to understand his writing began to surface only in the late 1980s and early 1990s, partly spurred by the poststructuralist ideas that were then a dominating force in Latin American studies.

Today, no Latin Americanist can afford to ignore the work of Ángel Rama. While his early work was influential primarily in literary criticism, his later analyses of Latin American culture had a wide-ranging impact. In the 1960s, Rama gained prominence as literary critic and editor of the cultural section of *Marcha*, a weekly left-leaning Uruguayan newspaper. He became known as a promoter of contemporary Latin American writers who were on the rise and later became known collectively as the Boom group. In 1970, he published his first major book, a study of Rubén Darío and Spanish American *modernismo* in relation to the incorporation of Latin America in the world economic system. Rama's book brought a new dimension to the topic, developing a line of inquiry that continues to play an important role in contemporary analysis of this literary movement. With his work on narrative transculturation in the 1970s, Rama's influence began to stretch beyond literature and literary history. His study brought attention to the relevance of the anthropological term transculturation for describing contemporary processes of cultural negotiation. However, it was the posthumous publication of his theory of the *letrado*, about the traditionally close relationship between intellectuals and state power, that found the widest readership. Rama's *La ciudad letrada* (*The Lettered City*) has greatly influenced our perception of colonial and nineteenth-century Latin American lettered culture and its use of the written word to exert power over what intellectuals perceived to be a disordered reality. Notwithstanding the originality and impact of Rama's thought, his work and ideas remain largely unknown outside the field of Latin American studies, perhaps because Latin Americanists themselves have not been very interested in studying his system of thought.

The lack of effort devoted to studying Rama's work as a totality or systematically is not surprising, though, when one considers the content of his prolific production. For Rama, a cultural critic's most important contribution to society—especially for a Latin American critic—was to comment on current events, controversies, and trends in the literary and artistic world, with the aim of helping the general public gain a historical perspective. While this view of the critic's task gave Rama a sense of being involved with the shaping of Latin America's cultural future, it also meant that he felt responsible for covering a wide variety of topics. As a consequence, a large part of his work is heterogeneous, some of it ephemeral in nature. While it is true that Rama's entire critical production cannot be reduced to a unifying theme or project, motifs and problems repeatedly surface in his work: social and artistic modernization, literature and democratization, the need to transform artistic form, and so on. My strategy in bringing those motifs and problems to the fore is to present a critical retelling of Ángel Rama's intellectual trajectory. This study follows the different stages in his intellectual journey from an editor of the literary section of a Uruguayan weekly newspaper to the most prominent figure in his field at the time of his death, while also providing a critical analysis of his most important contributions. Analyzing the evolution of Rama's thought requires an understanding of one of the key elements of his critical project: appropriating, from a Latin American perspective, the work of Anglo-European critical thinkers.

Chief among those thinkers whose work influenced Rama was Walter Benjamin. Rama started to read Benjamin in the 1960s—the first reference is from 1964—when the work of the German critic was only beginning to be translated into Italian, French, and other languages. In an interview with Jesús Díaz Caballero, Rama asserted that “the critical thinker who had the greatest impact and influence on me is Walter Benjamin; it was of capital importance for me to discover him” (18). Benjamin's work was especially important for Rama during the late 1960s and the early 1970s, at a time when he began to develop his own theories of Latin American literature, and, according to Jorge Ruffinelli, it continued to be highly relevant throughout Rama's career: “Very few people—except for those of us who have consulted Rama's library and looked at his letter archive—know that, during his final years, Rama was learning German with the purpose of having direct access to all of Benjamin's writings that had not been translated into French or Spanish” (55). A large part of my book is therefore devoted to tracing the influence of Benjamin in Rama's work. There are several other thinkers, such as Theodor Adorno, Georg Lukács, and Lucien Goldmann, whose work also influenced Rama's

view of modern literature and culture, though perhaps not to the extent that Benjamin's did.

In the first chapter I give an overview of the main stages of Ángel Rama's personal history. Most of the chapter covers his early years and his transition, during the 1960s, from a fiction writer to an influential literary critic in charge of editing the cultural section in *Marcha*. For Rama, becoming a critic and reflecting on the responsibilities that came with the title occurred at a time when intense, epoch-defining events such as the Cuban Revolution were taking place. Rama took on the role of cultural promoter for the new Latin American literature, contributing to the success of writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa. During the early 1960s, when Rama was leaving behind the dream of becoming a successful creative writer and accepting the role of critic, he began to systematically study the relationship between art and society. At a frenetic pace, he studied and assimilated the works of Lukács, Hauser, Della Volpe, Benjamin, Adorno, and Cassirer, among others. Some of these thinkers continued to influence him in the 1970s, while others practically disappeared. Galvano Della Volpe is a clear example of the latter; Rama's fascination with the Italian Marxist's *Critique of Taste* is not reflected in the work he was to produce during the following decade.

The first chapter also discusses the enormous influence that the Cuban Revolution had on shaping Rama's aesthetic views as well as his equally important rejection of the Castro government's antidemocratic practices. I analyze at length Rama's reaction to the imprisonment of Heberto Padilla, the event that led him and many other Latin American intellectuals to break ties with the revolution. The last section of the chapter focuses on Rama's exile in Venezuela during most of the 1970s and its effect on his intellectual life. The negative experience of exile was an important event that, as discussed later in this book, shaped his most important work in the 1980s.

The early influence of Benjamin and Adorno in Ángel Rama's literary criticism is discussed in the second chapter. Between 1967 and 1970 Rama worked on an influential book about modernismo, the Spanish American turn-of-the-century literary movement. For Rama it was important to take the position that the writings of Rubén Darío were as much a product of the Latin American reality as those written by more socially conscious writers such as José Martí. It was his first serious attempt at exploring a relationship between art and society that went beyond narrow notions of mimesis and ideology. A decisive inspiration in Rama's interpretation of the role of the poet within this movement were Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire and the transformation of Paris

in the nineteenth century. Modernismo would become one of Rama's favorite topics and he would return to it at different times—and from different perspectives—throughout his career. The chapter contrasts his early reading of Darío with a more sympathetic and daring one in the 1970s. I demonstrate that his interpretation of the concept of nature in modernismo derives from his coupling Lukács's idea of second nature with Adorno's view of the Kierkegaardian interior as a collection of objects. Rama was interested in how the influx of commodities from Europe was reflected in the modernista concept of nature. Through examining Rama's major writings on this literary movement, we can see that he develops a view of the relationship between modernization and poetry that finds its initial inspiration in Adorno, Lukács, and Benjamin but also departs from them in significant ways.

With the third and fourth chapter I explore a much deeper connection between Benjamin and one of Rama's major contributions to the field of Latin American literary history, his theory of narrative transculturation. In the third chapter I study the relevance of Rama's reading of Walter Benjamin in the early 1970s for the construction of this concept. Rama developed his theory of narrative transculturation to understand how Latin American authors who were interested in preserving local traditions and values were using modern European fiction writing techniques. Because the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz coined the term "transculturation" to describe the cultural exchanges that had taken place in Latin America throughout its history, Rama claimed that narrative transculturation was actually a representation of a Latin American perspective on the cultural modernization process. However, as my research in this chapter shows, Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproduction," alongside his writings on photography, were an unacknowledged inspiration for Rama's early ideas about the process of transculturation. I demonstrate that Ángel Rama had fully developed his theory before he encountered the work of Fernando Ortiz and borrowed the latter's term.

The fourth chapter continues to research Benjamin's influence on Rama, as well as that of several other thinkers such as Ernst Cassirer, Lucien Goldmann, and Lukács. In his search for a theoretical approach suitable for the Latin American literary field, Rama encountered one of the essential problems faced by all theorists developing sociological analyses of literature, from Lucien Goldmann to Fredric Jameson: the problem of mediation. In other words, he sought an explanation of how social events affect or are reflected in cultural products. Rama never wrote directly about the concept, but throughout his career he continued to look for a definition of that process. Even in

the last paper he read in public, he was still trying to find a satisfactory explanation for how the literary text always already contains the social. But Rama also employed the term mediation with other less abstract meanings. Through an analysis of Rama's high-profile debate with Mario Vargas Llosa, and his reading of Peruvian writer José María Arguedas, this chapter discusses the different types of mediations that take part in the relationship between writer and society, especially a society undergoing a rapid process of modernization. For Rama, Latin America needed mediating agents in the process of modernizing and updating its regional cultures; without them, local cultures could face annihilation. The chapter concludes with an examination of Rama's interpretation of Arguedas—as a transculturator—mediating agent—in relation to Walter Benjamin's ideas about the “author as producer.”

While my first four chapters emphasize the positive or creative side of Rama's critical work through the appropriation of Anglo-European theories, the next three focus on “negative” aspects of his later work: a problematic view of modern art inherited from the critical theorists he admires, a pessimistic mindset generated by his experience of exile, and his misinterpretation of Michel Foucault.

The importance that the concept of literary technique possesses for Rama's idea of the role of literature as a social act is discussed in the fifth chapter. Adorno's and Benjamin's emphasis on artists' need to employ in their creations the most advanced artistic techniques available to them influenced Rama's understanding of Latin American literature. Writing during a period in which notions of dependency and import substitution were still relevant within the Latin American intellectual milieu, Rama seriously studied the possibility of a connection between importation of technology and the adoption of “foreign” literary techniques. He reached the conclusion that literary techniques are not neutral tools that can be employed without taking into consideration the culture in which they were initially created. On the one hand, trapped by his adoption of critical theory's view of the need for advanced techniques in art, Rama is unable to promote the use of nonmodern literary techniques. On the other hand, he warns about an uncritical use of experimental techniques that could distort the social reality Latin American writers were seeking to represent. The chapter argues that Rama's uncritical acceptance of the notion of advanced artistic techniques limits his view of modern literature.

The sixth chapter studies a different kind of limitation in Rama's late thought—one that originated in his personal history rather than in his interpretations of other critics. I argue that the experience of exile had a strong negative impact in Rama's view of Latin American history and culture. Such

experience permeates what is arguably his most influential book, *The Lettered City*. Rama lived the last part of his life in exile after a military coup d'état in Uruguay made it impossible for the critic to return to his country. His stressful time in Venezuela, where he never felt completely welcomed, was exacerbated by the horrible experience of being expelled from the United States. The chapter analyzes the effect of displacement in Rama's critical work and contests traditional views of the connection between exile and the production of knowledge. I argue that Rama's prolonged exile led him to question the connection between modernization and democracy, and, as a consequence, to radically rethink some of his own long-held ideas on literature and politics. Challenging Edward Said's idea that intellectuals in exile find a "home" in writing, I show that in Rama's letrado theory the experience of exile leads him to conclude that writing is a "prison." He develops a surprisingly pessimistic view of politics, suggesting that *caudillo*-led political systems are the only political models that would be successful in Latin America.

The last chapter returns to *The Lettered City* and to what is perhaps Rama's best-known use of another critic's theory as inspiration. According to Rama's own argument in the initial pages of his study, Foucault's *The Order of Things* played an important role in the origin of the letrado theory. I argue that what actually has taken place in this text is a creative misinterpretation of Foucault. Many of Rama's claims about the meaning of Foucault's book do not withstand close scrutiny. Rama appropriated Foucault's ideas by selecting passages that supported his view of the origin of the lettered elite's power as related to the mapping and ordering of the Latin American cities. In the end, Rama's ground-breaking theory was based on an erroneous understanding of Foucault's view of language in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Although it has always been known that Rama was influenced during the 1960s by the early translations of Benjamin, Adorno, and Lukács, among others, the present book is the first attempt to systematically study the impact of these readings in his thought. What makes this task particularly difficult is that Rama sought to appropriate these thinkers' theories. In other words, while their presence is never completely hidden in Rama's texts, he often rewrites their theories. As he incorporates their ideas into his own critical project, Rama sometimes effaces their origins in the process. For example, despite his admiration for Walter Benjamin's works, after the early 1970s Rama rarely mentions his name, even in texts in which he is obviously attempting to rethink the German critic's ideas. This procedure is part of a critical approach he might have started practicing around the late 1960s, and during the following decade became an integral part of his critical project. The pro-

cess involves an appropriation of Anglo-European theories, taking into consideration the Latin American cultural tradition in which they are inserted. I employ the term *appropriation*—as well as words such as debt, influence, echo, borrowing—to describe his careful and partial adoption of other critic's views. However, it became clear to me that for Rama no appropriation or selection of ideas can take place without a similar process of selection taking place simultaneously in the Latin American part of the equation. I pay attention to Rama's strategies to infuse his work with a Latin American perspective as well as to the problematic aspects that sometimes resulted.

Finally, one goal of my study is to counter the still-prevalent perception that Ángel Rama continually repeated the same ideas in many of his articles and books.<sup>6</sup> The result of this thinking is that Rama's contribution to the study of Spanish American modernismo, for example, is mainly remembered and often cited as a socioeconomic reading of the movement's origin. That view might be correct as a description of his early book on Rubén Darío, but it fails to recognize his work on ideology and poetic form in José Martí, his unveiling the complex relationship between commodity and representation of nature in Darío, or his critique of Martí's "Our America" politics in *The Lettered City*. At different points throughout this book I have focused on the evolution of his reading of modernismo, hoping to debunk the myth that Rama repeated the same ideas. My objective is to historicize Rama's writings, to emphasize subtle changes in his texts, treating them individually instead of lumping them together. And yet, it is inescapable that Rama returns frequently to the same topics, and that, when he does, there is a certain amount of repetition in his essays, even as he reaches new conclusions or adds new dimensions to his previous readings. I believe that an explanation for this tendency can be found in his journalistic work. His experience working in a newspaper, especially his editing the weekly literary section for *Marcha* as well as frequent journalistic contributions to many other newspapers, greatly shaped his approach to literary criticism.<sup>7</sup> As it happens with any newspaper contributor, Rama did not expect his readers to remember the articles he had written several years in the past. The memory span of a newspaper reader could be weeks at most, or perhaps months in exceptional cases involving controversial topics. The need to restate information previously given, not only to jog readers' memories but also to provide background information to new readers—a common technique in journalistic writing—became part of the structure of Rama's critical work. A newspaper article may repeat information published the day before, with corrections and added information or speculation not included in the earlier version, and without necessarily providing much explanation or infor-

mation to readers about the mistakes corrected, because it is assumed that most readers have already “thrown away” or forgotten the previous edition. Likewise, Rama, especially during his *Marcha* years, and because of his view of literary criticism as an activity closely linked to the contemporary cultural life of the society to which a critic is contributing, saw his articles in terms of the immediate impact they had on his readership, not as reference texts for scholars. He referred to his approach as writing on paper made out of time (“el papel del tiempo”) because of the perishable nature of newspapers: “In Our America, we write on paper made of time, on time’s fleeting pages; our writing is spurred by the urgency of our readers, our social environment, and the time we live or the time that passes us by. Undoubtedly, time determines what we write; time scatters us and turns us into ashes” (*La novela* 9). Following the evolution of his ideas in what he considered “transient texts” became one of my main tasks in this book.