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Ultraism and the Historical Avant-garde

Andrew A. Anderson: *El momento ultraísta: Orígenes fundación y lanzamiento de un movimiento de vanguardia*. Madrid: Iberoamericana; Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert, 2017. Cloth 978-3-95487-573-3. € 50.00; pbk 978-84-16922-28-4; 978-3-95487-619-8. € 36.00. e-book 978-3-95487-620-4, € 36.00. 778 pp.

Andrew A. Anderson's new study on the Ultraist movement is an instant classic. Scholars of this Spanish avant-garde have long been relying on a couple of texts to find historical context to their investigations. Among these texts are Gloria Videla's *El ultraísmo: Estudios sobre movimientos poéticos de vanguardia en España* (Ultraism: Studies on Poetic Avant-garde Movements in Spain, 1963) as well as the indispensable essays by Juan Manuel Bonet, such as "Baedeker del Ultraismo" (1996) and his introduction to *Las cosas se han roto* (Things Have Broken, 2012), the most complete anthology of Ultraist poetry to date.¹ Anderson's book *El momento ultraísta: Orígenes, fundación y lanzamiento de una vanguardia* (The Ultraist Moment: Origins, Foundation and Launch of a Vanguard, 2017) joins the ranks of these texts. It will be indispensable for any serious examination of the origins of the Spanish and Hispanic avant-gardes.

The book focusses on 1919, the year this vanguard was born. Anderson methodically explains how Ultraism developed its self-consciousness and achieved moderate recognition in Spanish literary circles. His research is vast and impressive. Moreover, his ample bibliography, along with his review of all sorts of primary texts – letters, interviews, press reports, essays, magazines – and critical literature, offers scholars interested in the early stages of Ultraism everything they might need.

In the first part of the book, Anderson covers the early manifestations of avant-garde activity in Spain from 1916 until the rise of the Ultraist movement in 1919. In doing so, the study traces the life, works and influence of four precursors of the Hispanic vanguard: Ramón Gómez de la Serna (1888–1963),

¹ Other important historical / critical texts and anthologies of Ultraism and the Spanish avant-garde are published, in chronological order, Brihuega (1979), Gullón (1981), Barrera López (1987), Soria (1988), Bernal (1988), Fuentes Florido (1989), Bonet (1995), Díez de Revenga (1995), Harris (1995), Carmona and Lahuerta (1996), Barrera López (1997), Pérez Bazo (1998), Wentzlaff-Eggebert (1998, 1999), Valcárcel (2000), Osuna (2005), Soria (2007), Bonet (2009), Ascunce (2012), Sarmiento (2013). See also Anderson's own overview of previous studies in *El momento ultraísta*, pp. 12–19.

Rafael Cansinos-Asséns (1882–1964), Guillermo de Torre (1900–1971) and the Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro (1893–1948).

Anderson first focusses on Gómez de la Serna's literary production from the 1910s, which was mostly published in the periodical *Prometeo*. He reviews Gómez de la Serna's trademark *Greguerías* (Aphoristic Jokes, 1917) and thoroughly explores the poet's frantic social and artistic activity in Madrid and abroad. Specifically, Anderson spends some time describing the foundation of the *tertulia de Pombo* (1914/15), one of the most iconic gatherings of poets in the Hispanic world.² This assessment of Gómez de la Serna's contribution to the development of the Spanish avant-garde is enhanced by Anderson's impressive use of archival material and critical literature of the period.

Anderson also explores the life and work of two literary figures who, to a certain extent, were antagonists: the well-established poet, writer and literary critic Rafael Cansinos-Asséns and his younger counterpart, Guillermo de Torre, a power-hungry, aspiring poet and future leader of Ultraism. He reviews Enrique Díez-Canedo and Fernando Fortún's influential anthology *La poesía francesa moderna* (Modern French Poetry, 1913), which introduced modern poetry to the young Spanish poets, and then examines several articles published by Cansinos-Asséns between 1915 and 1917 and later reprinted in *La nueva literatura* (The New Literature, 1917). In these articles, the Sevillian author gives his perspective on the development of Spanish poetry since the turn of the century. Another important contribution is Anderson's critical research into Cansinos-Asséns's *tertulias* at the Café Colonial. Previous historiographical analyses of the meeting grounds of the Spanish vanguards have tended to highlight the importance of Gómez de la Serna's circle's meetings at the Café Pombo. This is in part because, as an active self-promoter, he turned those gatherings into a myth, most notably by publishing *La sagrada cripta de Pombo* (The Sacred Crypt of the Café Pombo, 1924). By contrast, Cansinos-Asséns's memoirs of his *tertulia*, mostly in his posthumous *La novela de un literato* (The Novel of a Man of Letters, 1982), are fragmentary and vague, and do not provide a comprehensive account. Anderson's analysis clarifies some historical issues regarding the *tertulia*'s participants and their relationships, as well as providing plenty of gossip and details about these weekly literary gatherings.

The author's thorough investigation of the personal, literary and epistolary relationship between Cansinos-Asséns, Guillermo de Torre and Gómez de la Serna in 1916–1918 is another valuable contribution. We discover a very young

² Tertulias were literary gatherings. Those at Café Pombo were held more or less regularly between 1915 and 1936.

De Torre – he is sixteen years old! – anxiously trying to find his place in Madrid’s literary scene. Through Anderson’s review of archival material, we see ‘Guillermito’ – as Cansinos-Asséns used to call him – going back and forth between *tertulias* and publishing houses, frantically submitting poems and essays, and conniving, if awkwardly, to secure his future rôle as the leader of a movement that at the time was still in an embryonic stage. In this account, Anderson delights the reader with evidence of how the young De Torre followed a shy and extremely patient Cansinos-Asséns around Madrid in the hopes that he would help him publish his poems and become his mentor.³ Additionally, Anderson’s review of De Torre’s and Cansinos-Asséns’s printed oeuvre is exhaustive and remarkable.

Anderson then moves on to examine the life and work of Vicente Huidobro through a discerning and prolonged discussion that correctly situates the Chilean poet as a catalyst of Ultraism. This segment is refreshing and informative and offers insightful analyses that confirm Huidobro’s rôle as the transatlantic spark that ignited Hispanic avant-gardism. It covers the period between 1916 and 1918, when Huidobro was living in Paris and mingling with its flourishing internationalist avant-garde. During this period, the poet became a major force in the European and Latin American literary fields, and Anderson offers a colourful recollection of stories depicting the bohemian lives led by Picasso, Apollinaire, Gris, Lipchitz, Cendrars, Cocteau, Reverdy and Braque, among others, as well as the series of encounters through which Huidobro became part of this circle. This section also contains a well-documented analysis of Huidobro’s publications, most notably, his early texts in *Nord-Sud* (1917) and *Horizon carré* (Square Horizon, 1917).⁴

Anderson then turns his attention to Huidobro’s visits to Madrid in 1918 and the five books that he published there. These are *El espejo de agua* (The Water Mirror, 1916), *Poemas árticos* (Arctic Poems, 1918) – the first collection of avant-garde poetry in Spanish – the long poem *Ecuatorial* (1918), *Tour Eiffel* (1918) – with a cover by Robert Delaunay – and *Hallali* (1918) – a selection of five poems in which Huidobro reflects on the Great War. Anderson also offers a wide-ranging exploration of the correspondence and initial encounters between

³ See Anderson: *El momento ultraísta*, pp. 202–218 and 517–533.

⁴ Anderson’s review of documents, including Cedomil Goic’s introduction to Vicente Huidobro: *Obra poética* (2003), confirms that despite Huidobro’s claims that he helped to set up *Nord-Sud*, he in fact joined the magazine after it had been founded by Reverdy (Anderson: *El momento ultraísta*, pp. 270–273). At the same time, Anderson provides compelling evidence that the date of publication of *El espejo de agua*, set by Huidobro in 1916, is in fact 1918, when Huidobro was visiting Madrid (Anderson: *El momento ultraísta*, pp. 280–284).

Huidobro and several Spanish poets – Cansinos-Asséns, Gómez de la Serna, Guillermo de Torre, Mauricio Bacarisse, Eliodoro Puche, among others – and of the gatherings at Huidobro's house in Plaza de Oriente. As Anderson follows Huidobro's footsteps in the Spanish capital, he demonstrates the poet's significant influence on the next generation of Spanish avant-gardists. The section ends with a brief but informative discussion of Sonia and Robert Delaunay's life and work in Barcelona and Madrid in 1914 and during the 1920s, highlighting the important rôle that the couple played in the midst of Ultraist activity.

Beyond Anderson's lengthy initial exploration of the origins of the Ultraist movement and the life, work and exchanges of its forerunners – Ramón, Cansinos, De Torre and Huidobro – the book also offers brief biographical entries on the poets he considers to be at the core of Ultraism. The selection is based on their participation in the *tertulias* and in events such as the *veladas ultraistas*,⁵ as well as on their frequent publications in the movement's magazines: *Cervantes* (Madrid, 1916–20), *Grecia* (Sevilla and Madrid, 1918–20), *Cosmópolis* (Madrid, 1919–22), *Perseo* (Madrid, 1919) and the early *Ultra* (Oviedo, 1919–20). Anderson also takes into account the previous choice of names made by Gloria Videla and Juan Manuel Bonet in their studies.⁶ His list includes fifty-three Ultraist poets and eight peripheral ones, among them Manuel Abril, Mauricio Bacarisse, Antonio Espina, Pedro Luis de Gálvez, Francisco Vighi, Gerardo Diego and Juan Larrea. The poets' biographical and bibliographical information is somehow short, however, especially when compared to the lengthy accounts provided by Bonet in *Las cosas se han roto*.⁷

5 Whereas *tertulias* were informal social gatherings of artists and poets, *veladas* were more organized events with a mixed programme of poetry recitations and other artistic presentations. Between 1919 and 1921, the Ultraists organized three *veladas*, one in Seville (1919) and two in Madrid (1921).

6 Bonet: *Las cosas se han roto* and Videla: *El ultraísmo*.

7 In *Las cosas se han roto*, Bonet includes sixty Ultraist poets. Anderson adds sixteen poets to Bonet's list: Juan Alomar, Joaquín de Aroca, Mariano Ciriquiain Gaiztarro, Evaristo Correa Calderón, Antonio M. Cubero, Carlos Fernández Cuenca, Juan González Olmedilla, Federico de Iribarne, José María Pernil, José María Quiroga Plá, José María Romero Martínez, Miguel Romero Martínez, Juan Soca Cordón, Salvador Valverde, Mauricio Bacarisse and Pedro Luis de Gálvez. He also excludes fifteen: Francisco Luis Bernárdez, Joaquín Edwards Bello, Mariano Gómez Fernández, Jaime Ibarra, Fernando de Lapi, Alfredo Marquerie, Fernando María de Milicua, Paul Morand, Andrés Nimer, Antonio de Obregón, Joan Salvat-Papasseit, Ramón del Valle-Inclán, Ruth de Velázquez, Juan Vidal Martínez and Javier De Winthuysen. Except for some interesting discrepancies – i.e. Edwards Bello, Salvat-Papasseit, Bacarisse, or Valle-Inclán (!) – both lists agree in their selection of who could be considered the core Ultraist poets.

Anderson then explores the foundation of Ultraism as a historical avant-garde, covering the years between the interview Xavier Bóveda gave to Cansinos-Asséns in *El parlamentario* and the publication of the first Ultraist manifesto in 1919 in *Cervantes* and *El liberal*.⁸ He details the use of the terms ‘Ultra’ and ‘Ultraism’ by Cansinos-Asséns and Guillermo de Torre from 1916 to 1919 and confirms that De Torre was indeed the father of the movement – at least in terms of nomenclature. Anderson’s study also offers a unique analysis of the ‘behind-the-scenes’ discussions that took place at the *tertulias* and how they led to the publication of the manifesto. The critic’s meticulous work in this section sheds new light on the events and conversations that gave rise to the first avant-garde movement in the Hispanic world (avant-garde understood as a self-conscious and self-promoted artistic movement).⁹ Moreover, Anderson offers important insights into how different members experienced the movement’s early development; he compares, for instance, Cansinos-Asséns’s and Guillermo de Torre’s dissimilar understanding of the events.

The last part of the book presents the reader with a review of the launch and reception of Ultraism in Seville and Madrid. Anderson includes a detailed examination of the *Fiesta del Ultra*, in which poets introduced performance into Ultraism.¹⁰ After an extensive canvassing of primary and secondary sources, he demonstrates that the launching of the Ultraist manifesto preceded the actual formation of the Ultraist group and not the other way around, as it is usually assumed.¹¹ The book also demonstrates how the recognition of Ultraism in Spanish literary circles – if that indeed ever happened – was a rather slow and uneven process. Poets and literary critics such as Cansinos-Asséns, Germán Gómez de la Mata, Tomás Luqué, Manuel Machado and Gómez de la Serna had ambiguous feelings about the movement; others, such as Astrana Marín, Eduardo Andicoberry and Francisco de Troya rejected it categorically. Still others, such as Miguel Romero passed very quickly from harsh criticism to appreciation. Anderson offers numerous examples of the exalted responses by Ultraist poets – Isaac del Vando-Villar, Pedro Garfías, Adriano del Valle, José

8 The manifesto appeared in the January edition of *Cervantes*, which was published late, probably in the last days of February. The appearance in *El liberal* on 14 February is considered the official launching date of the manifesto.

9 Both Huidobro and Gómez de la Serna published programmatic texts before 1919, for example in *Prometeo*, alongside Marinetti’s manifestos and Huidobro’s Creationist essays and poems. But they were not manifestos in the strict, historical avant-garde understanding of the term. It was the Ultraist manifesto that launched the genre in the Spanish-speaking world.

10 The event was organized by *Greca* in the Seville Athenaeum on 2 May 1919.

11 See Anderson: *El momento ultraísta*, pp. 414–415.

Rivas Panedas – to its critics and thus reveals the proselytism and original sectarianism that characterized the movement. Furthermore, the book includes an extensive review of literary contributions by Ultraist poets and members of the international avant-garde – mostly through translations – in *Cervantes* and *Grecia*. At the same time, it provides some rich epistolary analysis – almost always including De Torre and Cansinos-Asséns – and a very useful examination of early Ultraist texts published before *Vltra* became an iconic Spanish avant-garde magazine.

Although some sections of the book seem disjointed, they prove to be useful for any scholar researching the movement. There is, for example, an interesting analysis of the epistolary exchanges between Gerardo Diego and Juan Larrea, which recounts Ultraism from the perspective of two peripheral poets. There are also some interesting appendices that include the complete 1918 interview by Xavier Bóveda of Cansinos-Asséns, published in *El parlamentario*, the original texts of the first and second Ultraist manifestos (January and June 1919), and a concise survey of the painters who gave Ultraism a distinctive visual character. This last section offers handy biographical information on the artists, covering important figures such as Rafael Barradas, Norah Borges, Celso Lagar, Francisco Bores, and the Poles Jahl and Paskiewicz. However, these twenty pages are overshadowed by the more than seven hundred pages dedicated to the poets. If anything, the book might be guilty of providing too much information. The footnotes seem overwhelming and imposing, but they are in fact an asset, since most of the time they provide valuable historical context and noteworthy biographical and anecdotic material that makes for a distinctly enjoyable read.

Anderson's *El momento ultraísta* offers an engaging story of Ultraism and its protagonists. When reading it, we feel and we understand the worries, hopes, urgencies, frustrations and joys of an entire generation of poets. The book also succeeds in presenting its subject in an erudite and entertaining manner. In a way, Anderson's book is like the famous *viaducto de Segovia*, that iconic spatial trope on Madrid's Bailén street which casts its shadow over Ultraism. It is an imposing structure of almost 800 pages, a monumental scholarly and literary achievement that unfolds the poignant history of the Ultraist adventure. It also plays an essential rôle in the historiography of the Hispanic avant-garde and will hopefully be followed by a second or third volume, covering the years 1920–1923, during which the movement gained traction and earned its place within the literary history of Spain and Latin America. Together with "Futurism and Spanish Literature in the Context of the Historical Avant-Garde" (2000) and the study *El veintisiete en tela de juicio* (The Twenty-

seven in Question, 2005), this book confirms Anderson's authority in the field of Spanish poetry and his place among the leading scholars of Ultraism.

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