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Futurism in Venezuela: Arturo Uslar Pietri and the Reviews Indice and válvula

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Table of Contents

Editorial IX

Section 1:

Critical responses to exhibitions, conferences and publications

Giorgio Di Genova: Nuovi archivi del futurismo 3
Günter Berghaus: Růžena Zátková: An 'atypical' Futurist 7
Günter Berghaus: Plurilinguism and the Avant-gardes 14
Teresa Prudente: Futurism in the "Modernist Journals Project" 20
Karoly Kokai: Viennese Futurism 25

Section 2:

Country Surveys

Pierantonio Zanotti

What is Miraiha? Academic Discourses on Japanese Futurism 35

Section 3:

Futurism Studies

Matteo Fochessati

Broom and Futurist Aristocracy: When the Futurist Movement

Met the Machine Age 69

Irene Chytraeus-Auerbach

Marinetti in Berlin 104

Rubén Gallo

Wireless Modernity: Mexican Estridentistas, Italian and Russian

Futurism 141

DOI 10.1515/futur-2012.0001

<i>Beata Śniecikowska</i> Poetic Experiments in Polish Futurism: Imitative, Eclectic or Original?	171
<i>Dominika Buchowska and Steven L. Wright</i> The Futurist Invasion of Great Britain, 1910–1914	201
<i>Andrea Benedetti</i> The War Diaries of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Ernst Jünger ..	226
<i>Tiit Hennoste</i> Ethno-Futurism in Estonia	253
<i>Giovanna Montenegro</i> Futurism in Venezuela: Arturo Uslar Pietri and the Reviews <i>Indice and válvula</i>	286
<i>Christopher Townsend</i> Henri-Martin Barzun's "Simultaneism" between the Abbaye de Créteil and Futurism: The Individual and the Crowd in late-Symbolist Art	304
<i>Nikolai Sadik-Ogli</i> Finland and Futurism	335
<i>Nina Parish</i> From Radio to the Internet: Italian Futurism, New Technologies and the Persistence of the Book	378
<i>Stefania Serafin</i> Russolo's <i>In tonarumori</i> : Musical Innovation at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century	397
Section 4: Bibliography	
<i>Günter Berghaus</i> A Bibliography of Publications on Futurism Published in 2009–2011	421

Section 5: Back Matter	
List of Illustrations and Provenance Descriptions	461
Notes on Contributors	465
Name Index	473
Subject Index	495
Geographical Index	513

Futurism in Venezuela: Arturo Uslar Pietri and the Reviews *Indice* and *válvula*

Giovanna Montenegro

The short-lived revue *válvula*, published in Caracas in 1928, was symbolic of the cursory invasion of Futurism into Venezuela, and of the fate of the avant-garde in that country between the 1920s and 1930s. At a time, when the nation was struggling to shake itself free from the patriarchal influence of the caudillo Juan Vicente Gómez (1857–1935), and was simultaneously on the eve of a shift from an agricultural to an oil-based economy, artistic avant-garde movements arrived in cultural centres such as Caracas and Maracaibo not with the boom and thunder appropriate to war-loving Futurism but, rather, trickled in slowly, gradually changing the face of Venezuelan literature. That being said, the nature of *válvula*, in its first and only issue in January 1928, carried the urgency and abrupt nature of Italian Futurism within its visual and editorial content. The main propagandist of the new Venezuelan avant-garde was the young Arturo Uslar Pietri (1906–2001) who eschewed labelling the new literary movement a product of European vanguardism, yet, effectively, yielded to an Italian Futurist aesthetic in his first defence of Futurism in the review, *Indice: Quincenario de combate. Crítica y literatura*, in 1927. However, his collaboration with the *válvula* group in 1928 would mark the transition from his love of Futurist rhetoric to his demand for aesthetic and social renewal.

Keywords: Futurism in Latin America, Venezuelan literature, Little Magazines, literary manifestos, *criollismo*, *mestizaje*

Introduction: Futurism in Latin America and Venezuela

The Chilean critic Nelson Osorio Tejada, former director of the Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos Rómulo Gallegos (CELARG), and author of *El futurismo y la vanguardia literaria en América Latina*, dates the emergence of a Venezuelan avant-garde to the mid-1920s.¹ Like other avant-garde movements in Argentina, Chile, Cuba, Mexico and Peru after the

1 Osorio: *El futurismo y la vanguardia en América Latina*, p. 34.

First World War, the Venezuelan avant-garde was, in itself, a response to modernist aesthetics that permeated literary and artistic circles throughout the Americas.² The emergence of these aesthetic vanguard movements in Latin America corresponded to certain socio-political developments occurring within the region. However, they did not arrive *ahead* of the times, as the meaning of the term “vanguard” would imply, but rather *behind* them. During his stay in France and England, Venezuelan writer José Gil Fortoul (1861–1943) pondered the time shift between European Modernism and the avant-garde in the Americas and asked himself: “Is the recent [Modernist³] cycle coming to an end over there [on the American Continent]? It will probably fold later than here [in Europe] as *trends tend to travel at a sluggish pace*”.⁴ Fortoul’s question underscores the cumbersome nature of transatlantic travel that delayed cultural commodities (news, goods and ideas) between Europe and the Americas, and included everything from fashionable Parisian frocks to polemical Futurist manifestos. However, the concept of a “sluggish”, one-sided, cultural exchange (always beginning in Europe and travelling to the Americas) ignores the various Latin American identities of Futurism and their influences on North American and European artistic and literary trends; several Latin American vanguard movements used *criollo* and indigenous ideas to conceptualize a Latin American avant-garde. Thus, these movements shunned the colonial models that hinged upon the ideas, policies and fashions coming from the European Continent.⁵

There were a variety of responses to Futurism in Latin America, both in its initial stages when the first translations of Marinetti’s *Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* appeared in *El cojo ilustrado* in Venezuela (15 May 1909) and the literary magazine *Revista de la Universidad* in Tegucigalpa, Honduras (15 November 1909), and in the 1920s, when Uslar Pietri and

2 Osorio: *El futurismo y la vanguardia en América Latina*, p. 41.

3 *Modernismo* refers to the Latin American poetic movement that began in the late nineteenth century. It embraced Parnassianism, Aestheticism and Symbolism and contained many references to mythology, free poetic form and eroticism. It is not to be mistaken for European Modernism, although as a pan-Hispanic movement it also had repercussions in Spain. It was a heterogeneous cultural force, consciously American but also with many links to French literature.

4 Quoted in Osorio: *El futurismo y la vanguardia en América Latina*, p. 33. The original source is *El universal* (Caracas) 4424 (11 September 1921). The terms in brackets are mine unless otherwise noted.

5 “Criollos” are defined here as the white descendants of the Spanish colonialists who were at the top of the social, economic and racial hierarchies in the Spanish colonies (although one step down from those born on the European continent), and later, the independent Latin American nations.

others returned to Futurism with a renewed interest. The art critic and historian Serge Fauchereau describes the general impact of the international movement on Latin America:

From Torres-Garcia to Siqueiros, many Latin Americans met in Spain, particularly Barcelona. Here the Uruguayan Barradas created Vibrationism, and Ultraism gained the active support of the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges and his sister Nora. When Borges returned to Argentina at the end of 1921 he introduced Ultraism there by publishing several manifestos, while the periodical *Martin Fierro* and the painter Pettoruti introduced Cubism and Futurism. During the Twenties, there were signs of interest in Futurism in several Latin American countries, but the Futurist related movement that really triumphed was Mexican Stridentism.

The history of Brazil's relationship with Futurism is more complicated. Although the first Futurist manifesto was published in Brazil in 1909, the same year as it appeared in *Le Figaro*, it had no consequences, while the Brazilian Ronald de Carvalho, a contributor to the magazine *Orfeu*, introduced Pessoa, Sá Carneiro, Santa Rita, Almada-Negreiros and Portuguese Futurism to Brazil. Mario de Andrade (1893–1945) knew Soffici's books, but he was influenced by Verhaeren and the French avant-garde, as were all the Brazilian Modernists, writers and painters alike. At the end of 1921 Oswald de Andrade (1890–1954) consigned Futurism to oblivion: "Theoretical, accomplished Futurism has just died in Italy – it died a long time ago. Which is not to say that it was not responsible for a great artistic renewal, whose echoes have even reached Brazil."⁶

Annateresa Fabris was more fatalistic than Fauchereau when she explained the situation in Brazil: "The first articles on Futurism were written by critics who did not support the new trend, and soon the adjective Futurist became a synonym for 'pathological', 'crazy', 'bizarre', 'strange'.⁷ In Hispanic America, the Nicaraguan poet Ruben Darío initially applauded Marinetti's poetry, but would ultimately disqualify the Futurist manifesto as being *inútil* (useless) and stated: "I don't believe that his manifesto will do more than encourage a good number of imitators to do 'Futurism' out-and-out, many surely without having either the talent or the rhetoric of the initiator."⁸ This concern over pure and poor imitation on the part of Latin American artists with regard to European avant-garde movements was (and is still being) voiced as a matter of concern. Darío and other contemporaries respected Marinetti as a capable writer and artist, but they

6 Fauchereau: "Latin America", pp. 499–500.

7 Fabris: "Brazil", pp. 437–438.

8 "No creo que su manifiesto haga más que animar a un buen número de imitadores a hacer 'futurismo' a ultranza, muchos seguramente sin tener el talento ni el verbo de iniciador." Darío: "Marinetti y el futurismo", *La Nación* (Buenos Aires), 5 April 1909, reprinted in Osorio: *El futurismo y la vanguardia en América Latina*, pp. 45–48.

often saw Futurism's violence and dynamism as irreconcilable with Latin American culture.

The first news on Futurism in Venezuela

This recoil from the avant-garde was especially true in Venezuela, where a semi-colonial society based upon the agricultural system of coffee and cacao plantations was still in place, and where a succession of military rulers (*caudillos*) stifled the country's intellectual development. Two important centres of study, the University of El Zulia in Maracaibo and the University of Carabobo in Valencia, were shut down in 1904 by the caudillo Cipriano Castro (1899–1908). A few years later, Castro's successor Juan Vicente Gómez (1857–1935) closed the Central University of Venezuela in Caracas from 1912–1922.⁹ During the period of *Gomecismo* (1908–1935), seventy per cent of the Venezuelan population was still illiterate, and the cultural divide between the literate urban city and the agricultural countryside grew.¹⁰ Within Caracas, however, there were many national and international publications such as *Fantoches*, *Billiken* and *Élite*, among others, that catered for a small percentage of bourgeois readers who were perceptive of political and cultural events from around the world.

In the years 1909–1915, news related to Futurism and Marinetti's literary activities was published in Venezuela's leading literary journal, *El cojo ilustrado* (Caracas, 1892–1915). The editors tended to voice unfavourable comments, which is not surprising, given the magazine's fin-de-siècle aesthetic sympathies for Romanticism, European Modernism and especially Latin American *modernismo*.¹¹ For example, on 15 May 1909, the editors wrote:

Marinetti with his rebel appearance can only make us smile. His doctrine is profoundly bourgeois, obsolete, reactionary, and instead of offering him the insult of believing in his convincingly presented inanities, we prefer to suppose that he has chosen the carnival period to dispatch a good joke.¹²

⁹ Ortega: *La asociación general de estudiantes en Venezuela*, p. 11.

¹⁰ See Lasarte Valcárcel: "Los aires del cambio: Literatura y cultura entre 1908 y 1935", pp. 383–384.

¹¹ See *El cojo ilustrado en el centenario de su fundación 1892–1992*, p. 6.

¹² "Marinetti con sus apariencias de rebelde no puede menos que hacernos sonreír. Su doctrina es profundamente burguesa, obsoleta, reaccionaria, y antes que inferirle la injuria de creer en su convicción de semejantes pataratas preferimos suponer que ha escogido la época de carnaval para darnos una buena broma." *El cojo ilustrado* 18:418 (15 May 1909), pp. 283–284.

In the same article, the magazine's editors parodied the Futurist manifesto by referring to an invented new movement called *Energumerismo*.¹³ The *Energumerist Manifesto* called for "1. [...] the radical destruction of the cosmos as it exists now; 2. [...] the reconstitution of a new world without any preconceived plan (why are planets round instead of adopting the shape that each one of them would prefer?)"¹⁴

This parody of the Futurist manifesto adopted the mantra of destruction and renewal in line with the radical spirit of the avant-garde, an aspect that Arturo Uslar Pietri and Mariano Picón Salas would eventually emulate. However, in the course of time, the news and comments related to Futurism in *El cojo ilustrado* changed from sarcastic comments to laudatory discourses. The issue of 1 June 1909 contained excerpts of the *Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* as it appeared in Marinetti's journal *Poesia*, without any editorial interventions.¹⁵ In the issue of 15 July 1909, in a brief note entitled "Un fiasco", the editors introduced and translated a review by the Belgian poet and critic André Fontainas of Marinetti's epic poem *Conquest of the Stars* (1902), which he deemed to be "full of obscurities" (lleno de obscuridades). He also made some scathing remarks on Marinetti's magazine *Poesia* and the performance of Marinetti's play *Le Roi Bombance* (published in 1905, performed in 1909), which he considered to be "deplorable" and "a great error of a true artist who could produce something much better."¹⁶ In the issue of 15 October 1909, the editors of *El cojo ilustrado* called Marinetti's magazine *Poesia* a "beautiful literary journal" (hermoso cuaderno periódico), stating that it is "truly magnificent" (verdaderamente magnífica) and "an intense effort of pure art" (un intenso esfuerzo de arte puro). Their sole point of criticism related to the lack of Spanish and Latin American authors represented in the journal. *El cojo ilustrado*, which introduced Venezuela to many international and national authors, reprimanded Marinetti's editorial policies because they did not have a sufficiently global scope and did not show enough fraternal sympathies with the literatures and poetic traditions of the Americas:

13 An *energúmeno* is a madman, a fanatic, a person possessed by the devil.

14 "1. [...] La] destrucción radical del Cosmos tal como existe actualmente; 2. [...] la reconstitución de un mundo nuevo sin ningún plan preconcebido (¿por qué los planetas son redondos en vez de adoptar la forma que cada uno de ellos prefiera?)" *El cojo ilustrado* 18:418 (15 May 1909), pp. 283–284.

15 *El cojo ilustrado* 18:419 (1 June 1909), p. 312.

16 "Es un formidable error de un verdadero artista, que pudiera hacer algo mucho mejor." *El cojo ilustrado* 18: 422 (15 July 1909), p. 396.

It is time that our literature, which despite its initial stage of development is already so rich, be published and known throughout other romance-speaking communities which, despite superficial and romantic ethnic sympathies, only think of our problems so that they can show their dismay and hypocritical astonishment and to say nonsense about our region.¹⁷

El cojo ilustrado was perfectly entitled to say this, as this Venezuelan magazine did indeed possess a decidedly cosmopolitan attitude and translated works coming from Japan and Turkey as well as texts from more widely read (French, Spanish, German, Russian and Latin American) cultures.

Futurism made news again in *El cojo ilustrado* on 15 December 1912, when Jesús Semprúm wrote an unflattering remark on the release of Valentine Saint-Point's *Manifesto of the Futurist Woman*:

Many readers will remember Mr. Marinetti and his Futurist school that aroused the public's curiosity for some time. This was to be expected, as Mr. Marinetti and his disciples and colleagues would proclaim a score of atrocities, or at least that which we are wont to consider as atrocities, as part of their aesthetic credo. They glorified war, militarism, patriotism, anarchism, assassination and scorn for women.¹⁸

Arturo Uslar Pietri and Mariano Picón Salas

It was this focus on violence and misogyny that was to be replicated by authors such as Arturo Uslar Pietri (1906–2001) and Mariano Picón Salas (1901–1965), who embraced the innovatory force of the Futurist rhetoric and aesthetic and thus laid the foundation for a Venezuelan avant-garde. Picón Salas, at the age of sixteen, linked the necessity of war and literary renewal in a lecture given on 28 October 1917 at the Universidad de Los Andes in Mérida, in which he stated: "War is necessary. It is necessary because when the effeminate young man from the city shoulders his bayonet and smells the smoke of the canons, he forgets the make-up that

17 "Es hora ya de que nuestra literatura, tan rica, a pesar de su incipencia, sea divulgada y conocida entre los demás pueblos latinos, los cuales a pesar de la romántica y superficial simpatía de la raza, sólo suelen acordarse de nuestras turbulencias para escandalizarse en hipócritos asombros, y de nuestra geografía para decir dislates." "Revistas extranjeras." *El cojo ilustrado* 18:427 (1 October 1909), p. 538.

18 "Mas lectores deben acordarse del señor Marinetti y de su escuela futurista que despertó por algún tiempo la curiosidad de las gentes. No era para menos, porque el señor Marinetti y sus cofrades y discípulos proclamaban como cánones de su credo estético una porción de atrocidades, o por lo menos de lo que estamos acostumbrados a considerar como atrocidades. Glorificaban la guerra, el militarismo, el patriotismo, el anarquismo, el asesinato y el desprecio hacia la mujer." "La mujeres futuristas." *El cojo ilustrado* 21:504 (15 December 1912), pp. 676–677.

reddens his cheeks and gives his eyes a violet hue".¹⁹ Picón Salas obviously had the Futurists in mind when he spoke of the "New Art" that "praises the smoke-emitting factory, the aeroplane that cuts through the air and the submarine that searches the depth of the waters for the siren's nest."²⁰ As such, Picón Salas employed the Futurist rhetoric of *macchinolatria* (the veneration of the machine) and applauded the new technologies as an inspiration for the New Art that will displace the snobbism and exoticism of authors such as Claude Farrère and Octave Mirbeau.²¹ However, Picón Salas had to wait ten years before he could find in Uslar Pietri a counterpart ("un ejemplo equivalente"²²). Uslar Pietri, like Picón Salas, would at times imitate the early Marinetti's love of war and scorn for women, promote aesthetic innovation and rebel against the past while embracing the new.

Gloria Videla de Rivero, the Argentinean scholar of the Latin American avant-garde, suggests in her *Direcciones del vanguardismo hispanoamericano* that the avant-garde had two tendencies: one was to rebel against tradition, the other to look towards the future:

The avant-garde has two faces, one that looks towards its immediate past – and through it to a tradition to break with it – in a rebellious attitude that is often aggressive, annoying, iconoclastic and destructive. It is no longer "normativity" that is the worst enemy – as it was for the Romantics – but rather certain ideals of the literary tradition: mimesis, symbolism, *modernismo* in the case of Latin America (aristocraticism, musicality, free form, lyricism, exoticism and – in general – themes and forms with poetic prestige). The other face of the avant-garde looks towards the future. It has been observed that the term "avant-garde" has a dynamic connotation. The vanguardists want to develop the future, inaugurate a new era, change rhythms, contribute to progress (formal investigations, experimentation, incorporation of new themes and anti-conventional flavours).²³

The Venezuelan avant-garde worked in the same vein. Several writers and artists broke away from the aesthetics of exoticism, musicality and poetic

19 "La guerra es necesaria. Es necesaria, porque con la bayoneta al hombro y bajo el humo de los cañones, olvida el afeminado mozuolo de la ciudad los afeites con que ponía rosas en su cara y violetas en sus ojeras." Picón Salas: "Las nuevas corrientes del arte", p. 57.

20 "Cantan la fabrica que humea, el aeroplano que viola el aire y el submarino que va a buscar en el fondo de la onda el nido de las sirenas. ¡Ese será el arte nuevo!" Picón Salas: "Las nuevas corrientes del arte", p. 58.

21 Claude Farrère, pseudonym of Frédéric-Charles Bargone (1876–1957), was a French author who served in the French colonies and wrote a number of successful novels set in exotic locations, such as Istanbul, Saigon, and Nagasaki. Octave Mirbeau (1848–1917) was a highly successful journalist and writer of the French Belle Époque, best known for his (politically and morally) scandalizing novels.

22 Osorio: *El futurismo y la vanguardia en América Latina*, p. 32.

23 Videla de Rivero: *Direcciones del vanguardismo hispanoamericano*, p. 21.

sophistication, as embraced by novelists such as Teresa de la Parra (1889–1936).²⁴ The literary movement, *Generación del 18* (Generation of 1918), prepared the ground for Uslar Pietri's forays, in 1927–1928, into Futurism with the journals *Índice* and *válvula*. Members of the *Generación del 18* founded the independent *Círculo de Bellas Artes* in Caracas in 1912, in response to the Decadentism and *modernismo* practised in the Academy of Fine Arts. Among them were Julio and Enrique Planchart, Fernando Paz Castillo and Rodolfo Moleiro. While some critics condemned members of this group for doing too little against the repressive political atmosphere in the country, others highlighted their contribution to the shift away from *modernismo* to the avant-garde,²⁵ calling them the first post-*modernismo* group as well as the first pre-avant-garde group in Venezuela.²⁶ As Jorge Schwartz writes:

The first attempt to overcome Venezuelan *modernismo* occurs with the Generation of 1918 (José Antonio Ramos Sucre, Fernando Paz Castillo e Andrés Eloy Blanco) [...]. The second phase, of a more audacious nature, begins with the publication, in 1925, of the magazine *Élite*, which counts amongst its collaborators young writers such as Arturo Uslar Pietri and Miguel Otero Silva. This happened just before Arrafz's *Aspero* was published, a book of poetry which, according to Enrique Anderson Imbert, "drew a dividing line between the 1918 and 1928 generations".²⁷

As far as *válvula* was concerned, Uslar Pietri's main preoccupation centred on form rather than content. The magazine's focus on artistic renewal carried with it certain "growing pains": the artistic collective turned their back on the old and embraced the new, but the members of *válvula* as well as those of other avant-garde groups in Argentina and Chile wondered how they should respond to European literary and artistic innovation. When, eventually, they broke away from the cultural tutelage of Spain and France, they did so as members of new nations that were still in the process of developing a national identity and a consciousness of their 'Latin Americanness'. Thus, for them, the release from colonial fetters carried with it a desire to also break away from European forms of modernism. Videla de Rivero therefore concluded that the new trend was exclusively American:

24 Parra used her position of privilege, even as a woman in a field dominated by men, and her identity as a Venezuelan from *criollo* stock living abroad, to promulgate *modernismo* aesthetics in her novels published in Paris (e.g., *Ifigenia*, 1924).

25 Lasarte: "Los aires del cambio: Literatura y cultura entre 1908 y 1935", pp. 390–391.

26 Zambrano: "Modernidad y vanguardia en poesía venezolana de los años veinte", p. 82.

27 Schwartz: "Venezuela." *Vanguardas latino-americanas: Polémicas, manifiestos e textos críticos*, p. 185.

Our hypothesis is formed with regard to the relations between the American and European avant-gardes in a zone of critical-historiographical coincidences. We are convinced [...] of the otherness of Hispanic American literary creativity in comparison to European avant-garde literary movements. We consider that anytime there is artistic accomplishment (and not just a copy), American [artistic] expressions acquire different properties and conquer their own space in literary history. The expression that emerges in America is – as Borges says – fatally American.²⁸

Uslar Pietri, *Don Quixote* and the hispanization of Futurism in *Indice*

Arturo Uslar Pietri (1906–2001) was born into a middle-class family in Caracas and attended secondary school in Maracay, in the State of Aragua, where, at a young age, he began to publish his short stories. From 1923 to 1927, he collaborated with magazines such as *Billiken*, *Élite* and *Caricaturas* before starting *válvula* in 1928 with Miguel Otero Silva, Fernando Paz Castillo and Pedro Sotillo. Throughout his long life, this dedicated writer held many positions as literary critic and politician. He was a Senator of the Venezuelan Republic, a Minister of Education, a Minister of Domestic Affairs, Professor of Political Economy, a Presidential Candidate and the Permanent Venezuelan Ambassador to the UNESCO in Paris. For a short period, he was living in exile in New York, where he became Professor of Latin American Literature at Columbia University. For fifty years (1948–1998), Uslar Pietri wrote the “Pizarrón” column in the daily newspaper *El nacional* and set up two television programmes devoted to the humanities: “Valores humanos” and “Cuentame Venezuela.” Among his most-known literary works are the novels *Las lanzas coloradas* (The Coloured Spears, 1931), *La visita en el tiempo* (The Visit in Time, 1990; for which he won the Rómulo Gallegos Prize), and the collection of essays, *Las nubes* (The Clouds, 1954). He was also the recipient of the Prince of Asturias award and the *Grand Croix de la Légion d’Honneur*. Hence, it is impossible to overestimate Uslar Pietri’s imprint upon Venezuelan and world literature and culture.

28 Videla de Rivero: *Direcciones del vanguardismo hispanoamericano*, pp. 32–33.



Fig.1: *The Generación del 28*. Uslar Pietri is fourth from the left (standing).

However, Uslar Pietri was only three-years old when the *Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* was published on both sides of the Atlantic. As a young man, he observed the Futurist movement burgeoning in Latin America and the responses it received in Venezuela, especially following Marinetti’s tour of South America, from 13 May to 11 July 1926, which included stopovers in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Montevideo and Buenos Aires.²⁹ As a twenty-year-old member of the Seremos group, Uslar Pietri addressed Futurism in an article called “El futurismo”, published in 1927 in the short-lived literary magazine, *Indice: Quincenario de combate. Crítica y literatura* (Maracaibo, 1927). He reviewed Futurism’s recent past, praised Marinetti’s aesthetics, including his love of war and misogyny, and loyally defended him against the accusation of being “ridiculously eccentric”. The Futurist agenda of war, natural selection and misogyny were

29 See Castro Rocha’s “Futurist Past: On the Reception and Impact of Futurism in Brazil”, p. 213. The media attention surrounding Marinetti’s tour sparked off a renewed interest in Futurism, not just in the Southern Cone, but on the whole continent.

polemical points commonly alluded to in the Venezuelan press and often replicated by Uslar Pietri. He used in this essay Cervantes's *Don Quixote* to hispanize his Futurist project.³⁰ The "colossal purge of humanity" that Uslar Pietri referred to would even have come as a surprise to the valiant Don Quixote, "The Knight of the Sorrowful Face", and his trusted squire Sancho Panza, whom Uslar Pietri used to prove his point on natural selection: "Sancho would loathe this boldness of the Knight of the Sorrowful Face, who would take his shield and, ready for action, would go after the flights of this magnificent flag". In Uslar Pietri's reading, Don Quixote prevails in the end despite his manifest insanity. The illiterate fool Sancho Panza, who tries to stop Don Quixote from embarking upon his misadventures and misfortunes, must eventually vanish. Applied to Futurism, this means that war is a dynamic means of action. For Uslar Pietri, Don Quixote was an unconventional Futurist hero and a model to emulate in a Venezuela about to erupt into social unrest.

However, Don Quixote's romance would not sit well with the young Uslar Pietri, whose defence of Futurism copied Marinetti's ninth point in *The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* ("We wish to glorify war – the sole cleanser of the world – militarism, patriotism, the destructive act of the libertarian, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for women"³¹). While Don Quixote pines for his idealized Dulcinea, Uslar Pietri saw in women nothing but an anthropomorphic force that "throughout long centuries reeking of cemetery flowers" has chained men to a fatal course. In the present age, a woman is only a "complementary organ; if her physiological function ceases, she has no other function."³² Hence, in the *Indice* essay, Uslar Pietri adopted Marinetti's early misogynist rhetoric and praised man's struggle against "la belleza-mujer" (beauty-woman). However, the Futurist concepts of audacity, courage and dynamism became key features of Uslar Pietri's propagation of Futurist aesthetics in the magazine titled *válvula*.

30 The four numbers of *Indice* can be found in the National Library in Venezuela. "El futurismo" appeared in *Indice* 1:1 (19 February 1927) and has been reprinted in Osorio: *Manifiestos, proclamas y polémicas de la vanguardia literaria hispanoamericana*, pp. 238–240.

31 Marinetti: *Critical Writings*, p. 14.

32 "La mujer es un órgano complementario, cesada su función fisiológica no tiene otro interés; hay que librar el arte del 'gran claro de luna romántico que baña la fachada del burdel.'" Uslar Pietri: "El futurismo", p. 239.

The review *válvula* (1928)

Válvula was published in January 1928, shortly before the Carnival week of 6–12 February 1928, when Students from the Universidad Central de Venezuela had organized a march to the National Pantheon to honour the founding fathers of the Nation and to crown the Student Queen. However, a poem read by student and poet Pío Tamayo at the Carnival Queen's coronation, as well as other speeches, were judged by the police to be subversive.³³ The government stopped all planned activities and thus caused massive student protests throughout the country – the first ever to take place in Venezuela. Over 200 students were detained; some were exiled and many were sent to forced-labour camps. In this situation of proliferating unrest, *válvula* was an appropriate title for a magazine edited by the *Generación del 28*. The magazine served as an artistic 'safety valve' that sought to control an explosive situation, characterized by an overwhelming desire for both social and artistic reform. As such, the Venezuelan avant-garde developed in the midst of social unrest and massive demographic change and became a means for both aesthetic renewal and social reform. As Juan Carlos Santaella wrote: "As was to be expected, this literary rebellion – if it can be called that – emerged in a situation of political insurgency. This was the first time since Juan Vicente Gómez came to power that an iconoclastic movement would react against his terrible dictatorship."³⁴

In an editorial note published in the national newspaper, *El universal*, that announced the publication of *válvula*, the anonymous reviewer expressed a sincere admiration for the journal, yet its authors were labelled "enthusiastic youth", "youngsters" similar to other "juvenile groups", and the magazine as a whole was characterized as a "juvenile publication" and a "work of youth". Beside these references to the "youthfulness" of both editors and publication, attention was paid to their "noble" pursuit of "la belleza nueva", "lo bello" in "el arte nuevo" (the new beauty and beauty in the new art). The reviewer praised the magazine for offering a voice to Venezuela's artistic and literary vanguard, seen to be an integral part of a larger international avant-garde movement. In this sense, the authors of *válvula* fought not only against existing aesthetic forms, but also for social justice – and this at a time of turbulent student protests:

33 See also Raul Agudo Freites's *Pío Tamayo y la vanguardia*.

34 "Como era de esperarse, esta rebelión literaria – si se la puede llamar así – desembocará en la insurgencia política. Será esta la primera vez, desde su llegada al poder político, que un movimiento iconoclasta reaccionará contra la dictadura del terrible Juan Vicente Gómez." Santaella: *Manifiestos literarios venezolanos*, p. 33.

The young members of *válvula* aspire towards form, alongside those courageous groups of young people in all of the civilized world's large cities who fight for the creation of an art form that responds to a modern sensibility of life.³⁵

Recently, Yolanda Segnini framed the vanguardism of the *Generación del 18* as a phenomenon that broke with previous literary currents, especially *modernismo*: "With the release of the single issue of *válvula*, the avant-garde received its definite and irreversible consecration as a literary movement."³⁶ She concludes that, despite the *caudillismo* of Juan Vicente Gómez, the history of periodicals in Venezuela during the age of *Gomecismo* reveals that Venezuela was not culturally isolated. Foreign writers and essayists regularly published in Venezuelan media and there was also a permanent exchange of journals and magazines.³⁷ Moreover, if we examine *válvula* as an artistic expression of a Pan-American avant-garde, three key aspects emerge: 1) the movement was primarily fuelled by enthusiastic young authors and artists (*muchachos*); 2) the movement's members preoccupied themselves with reinventing aesthetic form; 3) the movement, while existing in its own specific tradition, aligned itself loosely with other similar-minded groups across Europe and Latin America.

This conflation of youthfulness, renovation and internationalism was characteristic of a variety of vanguard groups in Latin America and made them part of an international avant-garde alliance. In fact, the article written by Uslar Pietri for *válvula*, "Somos" (We Are), served as a manifesto that merged aesthetic renewal with social reform. Not only did the group aim to reinvent itself aesthetically through a break with outdated artistic schools, but it also expressed the need for a rupture with established social forms. Uslar Pietri and his friends rejected subtle nuances and semitones and instead preached the urgency of the scream and the efficiency of silence. In their view, art within a Latin American context needed to work

35 "Para cuantos solo aspiran a deleitarse en lo bello, a buscar las vivas manifestaciones del espíritu, la aparición de la simpática publicación juvenil no podrá ser sino motivo de noble satisfacción. La parvada intelectual de Venezuela aspira a tener su vocero, su papel propio, en el cual ofrecemos sus producciones. Será por tanto, 'válvula' obra de juventud, a la que no se puede exigir obra perfecta, cuando la misma perfección sería, en caso tal, signo inequívoco de limitación espiritual. Los muchachos de 'válvula' aspiran a formar al lado de esos valiosos grupos juveniles que en todas las grandes ciudades del mundo civilizado luchan por la creación de un arte que *respondía a la sensibilidad* de la vida moderna. En nuestra sociedad hay una inexingible devoción por lo bello y, en especial, por la belleza que busca el arte nuevo, y [illegible] puez, es seguro que la sana intelectualidad acogerá 'válvula' con el entusiasmo y la estimación que se merece. Saludamos cordialmente a la juvenil publicación y le deseamos un éxito que corresponda al teniente esfuerzo realizado para que 'válvula' saliera a la luz." "La revista 'válvula'." *El universal*, 5 January 1928.

36 Segnini: "Vida intelectual y gomecismo." *Juan Vicente Gómez y su época*, p. 219.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 227

with stark contrasts. Uslar Pietri promoted the discovery of a continent known primarily for its raw and unspoiled nature and turned this into a metaphor for the act of self-discovery. With audacity and faith, the *válvula* group rejected the cosmopolitanism and Parnassian character of *modernismo* and instead proclaimed the need to reinvent Venezuelan art with an eye towards internationalism, but also with a critical look at the very society they themselves were part of. Uslar Pietri emulated the genre of the literary manifesto (which was to become an important aspect of Venezuelan cultural history) as well as the dynamism of Futurism to call for a long overdue social and artistic renewal.³⁸ The manifesto reads:

We are a handful of young men with faith and hope, but without charity. We consider ourselves called to fulfil a great duty, suggested and laid down by ourselves: that of restoring and creating. Time will tell the validity of our work. We will work regardless of whether we will be understood or not! We know well that our efforts will be coupled with pain and for this we offer our young flesh.

We do not want to be classified according to schools or literary labels, nor will we permit this. We are of our time, and the world's heartbeat will be our guide. On the other hand, we have come to restore the true concept of a new art, already extremely abused by hypocrites and disfigured by untalented imitators, when not discredited by mannerisms that easily allow deserters and incompetent men to cut a fine figure.

The new art does not admit definitions because its liberty rebukes them, because it is never stationary in order to gain profile. The only idea capable of covering all "newisms" (literary, pictorial or musical), the only one, we repeat, is that of provoking new thoughts.

The new art's ultimate purpose is to suggest, to say all with the least possible amount of words (hence the need for metaphor and the double or multiple image) or to say it in a highly condensed manner, so that the aesthetic ensemble might flourish (with all attached possibilities) in the soul to whom it is directed rather than in the raw and limited instruments of expression.

We aspire to an image that will exceed or condense all that a treatise may say to an intellectual. To a canvas on which four brushstrokes capture more transcendence than all of the drawing manuals of the pompous schools of the past, to a music in which one musical note encompasses the whole state of a soul.

In short, we aspire to give the masses their own rôle as collaborators of a work of art, so that the artwork may realize itself in the soul with a totality denied by the instruments.

Our global purpose has already been stated: To suggest.

We know that rancid tradition wants to lock us out, and for this purpose it is already wielding one of its vicious maxims: *Nihil novum sub sole*. Like all respectable fighters, we like to concede the advantaged position to the enemy; we accept *a priori* that there is nothing new, in the academic sense of the word, but

38 On the manifesto see Ángel Gustavo Infante's "Estética de la rebelión: Los manifiestos literarios" and Santella's *Manifiestos literarios venezolanos*.

in return – and whoever dares to deny it? – there are a lot of virgin things under the sun that have never been contemplated: The possibility of discovery is still out there!

We detest all half-tones, all discretions; we only believe in the efficiency of silence or of a scream. *válvula* is the spout of a machine through which the explosive gas of the art of the future will escape. To begin with: we believe – that is already a force; we wait – that is a virtue, and we are ready to torture the seeds, to exhaust time itself, because the harvest is ours and we have the right to call for it when we want.

We are a fistful of men, young and with faith, with hope, and without charity.³⁹

Conclusion

The Venezuelan journal *válvula* was a project that expressed the desire of a small group of innovative and rebellious writers to promote a “new art” which expressed the spirit of the age, and in particular the creative potential of the Latin American people. In order to achieve this aim, they borrowed from devices and strategies developed by Futurist and other vanguard movements. These appropriations of the European avant-garde were not in the least imitative or plagiaristic. Uslar Pietri and his *válvula* group were innovative and original writers interacting with many like-minded artists around the globe. They possessed an internationalist outlook, yet at the same time they acted within the socio-historical context of 1920s Venezuela, developing a form of Futurism that was designed to break the chains of *caudillismo* and to promote social reforms in urban centres. It is in this vein that Uslar Pietri developed his literary craft that operated with the power of suggestion, the poetic efficiency of metaphors, as well as with a conflation of the powers of word and image, all used towards the ultimate aim of mobilizing the masses into becoming an agent of artistic and social renewal.

Uslar Pietri and the members of the *válvula* group employed a heterogeneous mixture of *criollismo*⁴⁰ and Futurist-oriented aesthetics. Some of their contributions took the form of the manifesto, short stories such as “Agua Sorda” (Deaf Water) by Carlos Eduardo Frías, “En el principio”

39 The translation again is mine. The original Spanish text can be found in Osorio's *Manifestos, proclamas y polémicas de la vanguardia literaria hispanoamericana*, pp. 278–279 and Santaella's *Manifestos literarios venezolanos*, pp. 33–37.

40 *Criollismo* was a literary movement in Latin America between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that had a preoccupation with scenes and types native to the Americas. It reacted against the influx of “exotic” ideas from Europe, especially Modernism, Futurism, the glorification of speed and machines, etc.

(In the Beginning) by Uslar Pietri and “Vástago” (Descendant) by José Salazar Dóminguez.⁴¹ Poems such as “30 y uno” (30 and One) by José Nucete-Sardi took the theme of the New Year's Eve to evoke the birth of the Future. Rafael Rivero employed Cubo-Futurist aesthetics in his cover design for *válvula*, using lower-case letters arranged diagonally across the page against a background of geometric shapes, as well as in his painting, *La coupletista* (The Cabaret Singer, c.1927) published in the magazine.

In conclusion, Uslar Pietri's turn to Futurism was a necessary step to further the process of artistic and social renewal that had already begun in Venezuela with groups such as the *Generación del 18*. Uslar Pietri's preoccupation with the particular American and Hispanic nature of artistic renewal made him identify with figures such as Don Quixote and, most importantly, would drive his later project of *mestizaje* (miscegenation) in texts such as *La creación del Nuevo Mundo* (The Creation of the New World, 1990), which saw the originality and the inventiveness of Latin America as a pre-conditions for the *creation* and *continuation* of a particular New-World culture:

We are still searching for Amazons and Earthly paradises, accepting facts so that through them we may do what a distinguished Venezuelan said, whose work I recommend because he is still a highly rated master, namely Simón Rodríguez, who said: “Latin America is original, and that is why it should not be copied”. And he added the phrase that I shall leave you with: “Either we are inventive, or we shall fail.”⁴²

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41 Pausides Silva: “De la alborada a cantaclaro: Literatura y compromiso en cinco revistas”, p. 421.

42 “Todavía estamos buscando Amazonas y todavía estamos buscando Paraísos Terrenales, aceptando los hechos para, entonces, a la luz de ellos, hacer lo que decía un venezolano ilustre cuya lectura les recomiendo porque sigue siendo un maestro muy valido, que es Simón Rodríguez, que decía: “La América Latina es original, por lo tanto no se debe copiar”, y añadía esa frase que yo dejo con ustedes: “O inventamos, o erramos.” Uslar Pietri: *La creación del Nuevo Mundo*, p. 178.

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