A Modernism Against Maestros: Horacio Quiroga and the Transnational Automaton

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Abstract
In this paper I will explore the possibility that Horacio Quiroga's regional treatment of modernist themes is more than a creole adaptation or mimicry of the European maestros, instead placing Quiroga in dialogue with an international framework of contemporary texts that explore conflicting attitudes towards modernity through dark portrayals of science and technology. I focus on Quiroga's 1910 novella El hombre artificial (The Artificial Man), a text with an amalgamation of themes and plot devices that have caused the work itself to be dismissed for being of 'poor quality.' Yet these themes and formal features integrally connect Quiroga's novella to a European social and literary tradition. I will focus my inquiry on the image of the automaton--an artificial or constructed human being that appears throughout Western literature, but becomes especially prevalent in modernist literature. By examining parallel treatments of the automaton by European authors Sigmund Freud and Karel Capek, I will demonstrate that Quiroga belongs to an international conversation which utilizes the automaton to draw attention to the common nature of these concerns and preoccupations evident in both canonical and marginal modernist literature. This comparative study of different portrayals of the automaton will thus complicate attempts to view modernist literature as a unified whole or single narrative. Labeling Quiroga a mere 'predecessor' of Latin American magical realism or imitator of European maestros is to remove him to a sphere separate from European modernism in order to preserve a coherent approach to a heterogeneous topic. We should instead utilize a comparison of these representations of automata to enhance our understanding of a complex, nuanced transnational modernism or modernisms that holds conversations across national borders.

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Horacio Quiroga. The man stepped on something spongy, and then at once felt the bite on his foot. He jumped forward, and turned around with a curse to see the jararacussu coiled up, awaiting another attack. The man shot a quick glance at his foot, where two little drops of blood grew painfully larger, and he drew his machete from his belt. The snake saw the threat and buried its head in the middle of its coiled body; but the blunt edge of the machete fell upon it, dislocating its spine. The man crouched down to the bite, brushed off the drops of blood and pondered for a moment. The current of the river now rushed toward the Brazilian side, and the man reached the shore easily. He staggered up the trail, but about twenty metres up the hill, he collapsed, exhausted, face down on the ground. Horacio Quiroga was born in 1878, a time when Uruguay and Argentina were going through many different economic and
social changes. Within months his natural father was killed in a hunting accident, the first of a series of tragic deaths that were to affect profoundly Quiroga and his work. Around the same time there were many changes in the arts too. The Modernist movement in Buenos Aires in the 1890s attracted many foreign poets, and in the capital of the Republic of Uruguay, Montevideo, there was a rise of intellectuals and writers, poets, novelists, dramatists and short story writers, includ...