‘HIGH-SPEED ENLIGHTENMENT’
Latin American literature and the new medium of periodicals

Víctor Goldgel-Carballo

Drawing upon studies of media history and print culture, this article analyzes the relationship among early-nineteenth-century Latin American periodicals, literary institutions, and new experiences of time and history. Framing these periodicals as a new medium which boomed during and immediately after the wars of independence, it underscores their impact upon forms of reading and writing, as well as their importance for concurrent and later debates on the norms governing literary institutions, including the status and definition of literature. Ultimately, this new medium gave rise not only to a new prose—which was described as accelerated and therefore ‘modern’—but also to new forms of discursive authority and to an unprecedented legitimacy for literary genres such as the novel. As such, this article departs from the nation-building paradigms that have governed studies of the Latin American nineteenth century, establishing instead a dialog between periodicals of the whole region, with an emphasis on Cuba, Chile, and the Río de la Plata.

KEYWORDS Periodicals; new media; novelty; Latin America; nineteenth century

Periodicals started to proliferate in Latin America at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in the context of the wars of independence that took place between 1810 and 1825. Up until 1810, only 45 had been published, most of them in cities such as Mexico and Lima, which had strong cultural traditions, given their preeminence in the colonial context. However, another 500 would see the light in the brief period between 1810 and 1830, and in many regions—such as the Río de la Plata, Chile, and Venezuela—the first would appear only during the first years of the nineteenth century.1 Thus, when we take the continent as a whole, it is arguably during the first half of the nineteenth century that the periodical press effectively emerges in Latin America. In this article, I would like to discuss some of the reasons why it might be critically productive to use the category of new medium to frame these periodicals.

Now that the ‘end of media history’ that digital new media were supposed to herald seems more and more elusive, it has become easier to visualize the long history of the concept of the ‘new’ in its relationship to media.2 On the one hand, as the trajectory of publications such as Journal of Newspaper and Periodical History and Media History demonstrate, the link between media and their perceived newness in the context of modernity can be studied in a way that is not limited to the last 20 or 30 years in history. The rupturistic and properly modern claims of digital new media gurus that marked the last two decades have also been matched by a growing bibliography on the history of new media which aims at putting present-day forms in dialog with older ones.3 And one of the

This article is based on archival research that I conducted in Havana, Buenos Aires, Montevideo, and Santiago de Chile during 2007 and 2008, with a fellowship by the Social Science Research Council.
things that we can learn from this bibliographical corpus is that the link between media and the trope of newness was not born with digital technologies. In the case of Latin America, the history of this link can be traced back to the boom of periodicals of the early nineteenth century and to the Enlightenment-inspired discourse that surrounded them. As I will argue here, framing these publications as a new medium will help to understand their boom and their novelty as part of a wider transformation in the norms of literary institutions, a transformation that led to new modes of reading and writing, as well as to new ways of claiming cultural authority.

Although all media were once new, early nineteenth-century periodicals were a new medium in a more specifically modern sense. In the rise of a type of historical consciousness that privileged expectations over experience—*modernity*, such as it has been defined by Reinhard Koselleck (255–75)—Latin American writers perceived periodicals as valuable not only because they were useful but also because they were something new. From this perspective, periodicals were a ‘new’ medium inasmuch as they were perceived as modern, that is, inasmuch as their claims to break with the past overrode their claims to continue a specific cultural tradition. Whereas during the late eighteenth century the discourse of the Enlightenment articulated throughout the Spanish empire had given unprecedented legitimacy to the new in its quest for the rational and the useful, the ‘high-speed Enlightenment’ characteristic of nineteenth-century periodicals intensified this process to the point that the new could become an autonomous source of cultural value. In a similar fashion, with the boom of periodicals that occurred during the early nineteenth century, the Enlightenment-era assumption that this medium served to disseminate knowledge gave way to a more complex vision. While periodicals were from the beginning praised for their speed—that is, for their ability to keep readers updated on the constant changes of the world in a way that other media such as books could not do—as the first decades of the nineteenth century went by Latin American authors also started noticing their effects on modes of reading and writing. Ultimately, as I will suggest in the last pages of this article, the debates on the *accelerated* prose of periodicals—a prose characterized by variety, shortness, and accessibility—laid the foundation for later debates on literary genres such as the novel. Thus, while this essay, and the larger research project of which it forms a part, are an attempt to rethink the emphasis in the field of nineteenth-century Latin America on individual authors and works (above all, the novel) as steps toward a teleological ‘nation-building’ process, I also want to convey here how the at times impressionistic and essayistic reflections on the new medium that emerges in periodicals themselves provides us with cues for understanding major figures in the canon of Latin American literature.

As with all media, periodicals did not develop in a universal and self-governing realm, but responded to the singularity of political, economic, and cultural conditions. In the case of Latin America, the wars of independence were most likely the main reason behind their massive emergence. These wars heralded unprecedented levels of press freedom and a great number of publications made in the quest for defining a new political legitimacy. Consequently, periodicals of this period have been often mined for data regarding particular aspects of political history or framed as instrumental for the formation of public spheres or imagined communities. I would like to suggest, however, that these efforts to elucidate processes of nation-building have obscured the literary significance of
periodicals and, more specifically, their logic and materiality as a particular type of media. Simply put, scholars working on colonial and nineteenth-century Latin America have traditionally studied periodicals in descriptive, chronological, and biographical terms, or, at the most, as registers of the past—that is, as containers of information about events that were exterior to them (Cruz Soto 423). In the case of literary periodicals, they have been usually studied either as part of chronological vistas (in the histories of national journalism, for example), or as individual enterprises whose significance does not go beyond that of their specific editor (usually, a canonical writer). By simultaneously approaching a wide range of periodicals and entering into dialog with the field of media history, I highlight how an analysis of the logic and materiality of this particular kind of media, as well as of the ways in which it was experienced by contemporary writers, helps to understand the first half of the nineteenth century in terms of a deep restructuring of the institution of letters. Periodicals were certainly not the only factor leading to this restructuring process, which was marked by the emergence of new forms of prose and the transformation of the very concept of literature. However, inasmuch as they were perceived, with utopian overtones, as the medium that would dispel the ‘darkness’ of three centuries of colonial domination, they remain a privileged platform from which to make sense of these changes.

Thus, although the majority of the new publications of the period were mainly political and partisan, I will focus on a quantitatively minor corpus, that of literary periodicals. I define them as ‘literary’ not because they included fables, poems or other pieces of belles lettres within their pages, but because they reflected metacritically—in a ‘philosophical’ or ‘literary’ way, to use the terms that were most common during the period—upon the nature of the new medium and its potential impact on literary institutions. In this sense, they analyzed the conditions of possibility of the totality of arts and sciences that was known as ‘letters.’ And although literary periodicals were of course marked by the wars of independence and by nation-building processes, the great similarities between those publications made in newly formed republics such as Argentina and Chile and those made in regions that maintained their colonial status—such as Cuba—show that at least some of our explanations should go beyond the analytical framework of the modern nation-state, up until this point the dominant framework by which we read nineteenth-century Latin American literature.

From this perspective, any understanding of the literary culture of this period must come to terms with the simultaneously central and precarious position of its periodical press. On the one hand, the centrality of periodicals for what we usually understand as nineteenth-century Latin American literature is indisputable. From the Mexican J.J. Fernández de Lizardi (1776–1827) to the Chilean Alberto Blest Gana (1830–1920), from the Argentine Domingo F. Sarmiento (1811–1888) to the Cuban Cirilo Villaverde (1812–1894), the most canonical writers of the period produced a great amount of their writing for periodicals; it was also in great part through periodicals that women writers were able to shape the public sphere, as in the case of Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda’s Alúm Cubano de lo Bueno y de lo Bello (Havana, 1860) and Juana Manso’s Alúm de señorítas (Buenos Aires, 1854); and it was in periodicals where many of the most well-known works of the century were initially published—Sarmiento’s Facundo (Santiago de Chile, 1845), Machado de Assis’ Memórias póstumas de Bras Cubas (Rio de Janeiro, 1880), the first
version of Villaverde’s *Cecilia Valdés* (Havana, 1839), and so on. During the nineteenth century, in fact, Latin American literature emerged either through periodicals or in a productive tension with them.

On the other hand, the boom of periodicals that occurred during the first decades of the century was not accompanied by the formation of a solid market for print texts. On the contrary, almost all of the publications disappeared after just a few issues; the ones that survived usually had a few hundred subscribers at most. As a Chilean journalist put it, the history of periodicals in the region was a ‘a long succession of noisy births and premature deaths’ (*Revista de Santiago*, Santiago de Chile, vol. III, 1873, 457). So even though they were central—in the sense that they were one of the main platforms for the publication of written texts—periodicals were at the same time precarious. But it might be precisely their precariousness, rather than their centrality, which allows us to frame them as a new medium, that is, a medium with an uncertain destiny, whose use and impact are yet unclear. If new media are new, it is precisely because at their specific historical moment it is still not very clear what they are, how they can be used, and what their relationship to other media will be (Gitelman and Pingree xii). Latin American periodicals would only begin to be perceived as a stable medium, mainstream and standardized, during the last decades of the nineteenth century; at that moment, they would lose much of their novel character.

Of course, this might require clarification. If periodicals had been thriving in Europe for more than a century, what could possibly be new or uncertain about them? Should we not admit that this ‘new medium’ was actually a little bit old when it began to be produced in cities such as Santiago de Chile, Buenos Aires, Caracas, Rio de Janeiro, or Havana? Although there is no space here to fully answer these objections—such an answer would actually require to either reinstate or dismiss the old debate on cultural importation—, it is at least necessary to point out two of their underlying assumptions. In the first place, the assumption that there is only one ‘newness,’ or that the new happens first in some places and is then reenacted in others. From this developmental perspective, the fact that periodicals were a relatively well-known medium in certain regions of the world would force us to characterize the Latin American ones as a delayed new medium. In such characterization, however, the categories of ‘medium’ and the ‘new’ have been abstracted from their concrete historical manifestations. As a cultural technology, periodicals could not be new in the same way in seventeenth- or eighteenth-century France and in nineteenth-century Latin America. This leads us to the second assumption, according to which a medium (conceived, once again, as a universal category) is intrinsically capable of determining the way in which it will be used and the social impact it will have. But although it is certainly true that Latin Americans hoped to reproduce many of the effects that periodicals had supposedly had in Europe and North America—the construction of a public sphere, the education of citizens, and so on—their publications could not but respond to local media ecologies (in particular, the prevalence of oral forms of communication and the scarcity of books played a more important role in Latin America than in Europe). Perhaps the most expedient way to overcome these objections, however, is to underscore what I will show in the pages that follow: that periodicals were experienced as a new medium by their Latin American editors of the early nineteenth century.
‘Hunger for the New’

As I suggested in the previous section, early nineteenth-century periodicals may be framed as a new medium not so much because they were among the first to be published in the region, but because newness stopped being one attribute among many in order to become a major and relatively autonomous source of cultural value. The trope of newness was itself central in these publications, which incessantly described the Enlightenment as a break with a past irrationally overloaded with myths and as the creation, by force of reason, of a *new time* of freedom and knowledge. The ‘new ideas’—as the Enlightenment was usually referred to in those pages, even until the mid-nineteenth century—were expected to dispel ‘three centuries of darkness’ in the Spanish empire, and literary periodicals were the publications that best represented the period’s belief that educating citizens through these ‘new ideas’ would immediately bring about progress and civilization.

The legitimacy granted to the new by the discourse of the Enlightenment, however, could not but foster a characteristically modern process of acceleration. If the dissemination of the ‘new ideas’ was something valuable, the spiral of innovation demanded an increasingly rapid dissemination. In the case of periodicals, this implied a move toward brevity and variety, a move visually evident when one compares publications from around 1800 to others from three or four decades later. As the nineteenth century went on, of course, this trend became more and more pressing. In 1860, for example, the Chilean journalist Julio Arteaga Alemparte described it as follows:

> There is hunger for the new. We get tired today of the things that pleased us yesterday. Tomorrow we will reject with scorn what entertains us, enchants us, and maybe makes us happy today. The newspaper ['diario'] is in the best position to obey this tendency. Only the newspaper can satisfy this persistent and prevailing need. (‘El diarismo en la América Española’, *La semana*, Santiago de Chile, 3 March 1860, 148)

Of course, the last two sentences seem now extremely dated. With the emergence of the radio, the television, or Twitter, the printed newspaper has progressively lost much of its privileged intimacy with the new. During the nineteenth century, however, Latin American writers understood periodicals as the most effective means to satisfy the desire for constant renovation that increasingly marked cultural life in the region. In their view, periodicals were not only a new medium, but also a medium with which to satiate that ‘hunger for the new’ observed by Arteaga Alemparte. Latin American periodicals seemed to derive a great part of their value from the speed with which they could reproduce and put recent knowledge, opinions, and data in circulation.

But rather than simple containers of information, they were understood as a symptom of an acceleration in the tempo of culture in general: ‘When you travel by steam, you also need to think by steam!,’ as Arteaga Alemparte wrote in the same article (148). Faster times, he observed, require faster media; and precisely because they were faster, and therefore seemed to mediate better, periodicals were considered more modern, that is, more appropriate to present times than previous media. And while I lack space in this article to develop this point further, it should be at least noted in passing that this new tempo was more complex than a simple question of speed. As Mark W. Turner has observed in an essay on periodicity in nineteenth-century British journals, the multiplicity
of publications made in the effort ‘to match the hurried pace of modern life with an equally hurried form of prose’ meant the cacophonous juxtaposition of several cycles or periodicities (daily, weekly, monthly, etc.), rather than a uniform acceleration (Turner 188–90).

At an increasingly rapid pace, periodicals multiplied words and made them cheaper, announcing an era in which the consumption of print texts would be a daily matter, and not an extraordinary occasion. In 1820, for example, and taking advantage of a liberal interregnum in the Spanish empire (of which Cuba was still a part), Havana’s El Argos proclaimed that periodicals ‘spread like electric fire, and penetrate the palaces of the rich and the huts of the misfortunate; both the marquise and the artisan read them’ (July 1, 1820, 4). The fact that we now perceive these remarks as naive and hyperbolic, as the kind of wishful thinking that characterized Enlightenment-era writers, is precisely an indicator of the extraordinary power of periodicals to channel utopian hopes during the period. Whether or not they had the potential to deliver their promises, periodicals were certainly the medium for the articulation of these hopes. 10 Before the public education programs that the nation-states put in motion during the second half of the nineteenth century, Latin American writers believed in the power of periodicals to produce readers and enlighten society.

Literacy rates were of course extremely low during the nineteenth century, and therefore the democratization of knowledge through periodicals had very clear limits (Serrano and Jaksic 64). Historians certainly have a point when they remind literary critics that these publications had very few readers, and that it would be therefore unjustified to state that they transformed society, gave rise to national identities, or accomplished any of the other deeds that their editors announced as imminent.11 Periodicals, however, were part of a transformation within the lettered city, a transformation in literary norms that informed the very sources upon which our re-readings of history are based. Jean Franco, for example, has suggested that periodicals brought about a certain democratization, albeit not so much in the number of readers as in the modes of writing. While acknowledging that it could not reach the vast majority of the population, Franco observed that ‘the periodical of the early nineteenth-century opened the doors to non-professional writers, and spread information in a relatively clear way’ (Franco 4). At any rate, during the first half of the nineteenth century in Latin America, it was increasingly clear that periodicals had an impact on forms of reading and writing.12 That is why, as I would like to argue, the importance of periodicals did not simply reside in the numbers of people who had access to them. It was rather the transformation of norms of writing and reading that was important; the transformation of the ways in which texts were laid down, distributed, and received. It is in this way, it could be said, that the new medium of periodicals affected Latin American societies, even before becoming widespread.

In order to further analyze the link between this new medium and the crisis in the traditional norms of literary institutions, I will quickly sketch out how writers understood it. Many, if not most of the early-nineteenth-century writers, were actively involved in the edition of periodicals, and they often referred with fascination to what they experienced as an acceleration of prose. The Argentine Domingo F. Sarmiento, who had an active career as a journalist during his exile in Chile in the 1840s, constitutes a prominent example. In 1841, four years before publishing his rapidly canonized Civilización i Barbarie as a feuilleton,
Sarmiento wrote an article entitled ‘El diarismo’ (‘Newspaper Journalism’) in which he observed the following:

The newspaper embodies present-day societies, and it can be said that their literature, languages, and eloquence suffer from the shortness, superficiality, and circumstantial character of newspapers. In antiquity, the life of a sage was barely enough to produce a book; today, a few hours suffice to send the article to the press. (Sarmiento 59)

New media, from the newspaper to the Internet, have been repeatedly attributed this power to mark the emergence of a new time—in the case of Sarmiento, that ‘present’ time of periodicals that seems to be radically removed from the past time of books. Not surprisingly, Sarmiento repeatedly reminded his contemporaries that Mariano José de Larra (1809–1837), the Madrilenian whom he considered the most prominent Spanish writer of the century, had achieved fame publishing not books but newspaper articles (Sarmiento 115). Although the acceleration of cultural production means that all writings, brilliant or mediocre, ‘die with the day,’ the journalistic production of someone like Larra proved that glory could also be achieved under the sign of speed and brevity.

Sarmiento, however, was far from being the first writer in noticing that periodicals not only disseminated ideas and information but also produced new forms of prose and a new relationship to knowledge linked to variety, brevity, and constant renewal. One of his most immediate and relevant predecessors was José Joaquín de Mora, a Spanish exile in London who was invited to Buenos Aires in 1827 by the Argentine government, and who later lived in Chile, Peru, and Bolivia. The same year of his arrival to Latin America, Mora stated the following in his newly founded El conciliador: ‘precisely because they seem to satisfy a momentary curiosity, these productions [periodicals] are the most timely vehicles of truth, and the most effective tools for Enlightenment’ (El conciliador, Buenos Aires, May 1827, 78). Whether they were timely because ‘truth’ changed all the time or because the curiosity of readers did not last very long, periodicals showed substantial differences with respect to previous forms of print materials. With increasing frequency, they now seemed to be based on the ephemeral and to conceive their task not just as enlightening their publics, but as a kind of high-speed Enlightenment. Given that the ‘truth’ to which Mora refers to in the quote above had shifted away from the slow rhythms of books and dogma, and that reading publics were becoming increasingly impatient, the fleeting and the transient stopped being negative attributes and acquired an unprecedented cultural value.

But if many members of the lettered city faced the increasing importance of brevity and speed with enthusiasm, others reacted with caution. In some cases, the sense of alarm caused by periodicals went as far as to compromise the printing press itself, which, at the time, was probably the most glorified technology in Latin America. In 1836, for example, an anonymous writer from Montevideo pointed out the following paradox: although Gutenberg’s machine put all kinds of knowledge in circulation, it also made knowledge volatile. ‘This extremely useful invention’—he wrote—‘has produced astonishing effects, but in a superficial way; it teaches how to know, but not how to think; you do not know more than what you read, and you even forget that knowledge later, because it did not require work to learn it’ (El republicano, May 6, 1836, 3). The opportunity to read and write was increasingly present, but that proximity seemed to put traditional forms of knowledge
in crisis. It is worth noticing that these sorts of arguments were not born with periodicals, and will most likely not end with digitization. By breathing new life into the printing presses of the continent, nineteenth-century periodicals also spawned critiques that had been directed against print and writing in previous moments of history. Plato’s attack on the technology of writing in the *Phaedrus* and the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century laments over the dire effects that the printing press would have on memory and wisdom would therefore be resuscitated in early nineteenth-century Latin American by the boom of periodicals.

At the same time, it should be noted that the new literary values, the values of *speed*, *brevity*, and *variety*, did not ‘supersede’ traditional forms of written production but coexisted in tension with them. That is why the same person—Mora, for example—could simultaneously praise the modern prose of periodicals and write poems in a more or less neoclassical vein: the neoclassical canon was still capable of governing the writing of poetry, but the new medium was better suited to the need to express (and mold) new experiences of time, cultural change, and history. In this sense, it is interesting to note that the transformations in the norms of literary institutions that ‘romantic’ writers would both demand and observe in the 1830s and 1840s were first noticed in regions such as Havana, where the periodical press had an early and relatively strong development. The Cuban journalist Buenaventura Pascual Ferrer (1772–1851) is, in this respect, a good example. His *El regañón de la Havana* (1800–1802) was a satirical publication devoted to criticizing other periodicals. In its pages, Ferrer wrote that the new medium demanded a style that is both clear and concise. Whereas the authors of lengthy works sought to substantiate their ideas by appealing to ‘quotes,’ ‘history,’ and erudition, the journalist had to make recourse to ‘the new,’ a ‘variety of topics,’ and a simple and vivid style (*El regañón*, October 25, 1800, 66–7). In the view of Ferrer, the old writing was erudite, deep, and rooted in the past, whereas the new one was varied, superficial, and geared toward the future. And this new writing was produced by a new type of author, who did not find legitimacy in a university title or the knowledge of Latin but in the ability to be up to date and to communicate clearly.

From this perspective, the emergence of what we could call modern prose and modern forms of discursive authority did not depend on political modernity or the construction of the nation-state; it depended on the growing importance of periodicals. As the new medium that paved their way, the modern literary norms would now seek their validity in ‘the new.’ If modernity ‘no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; it has to create its normativity out of itself’ (Habermas 7), modern Latin American literature, in a similar fashion, articulated itself through an explicit rejection of the literary norms of the past—especially in regions such as Cuba, Venezuela, Argentina, and Chile, where the colonial heritage was less pressing.

**A New Literature**

In order to respect the meaning that the term had during the early nineteenth century, throughout this essay I have used the concept of ‘literature’ to refer both to *belles lettres* and to that totality of letters and sciences that the Enlightenment was supposed to
revolutionize. The periodicals I have mentioned were in all cases literary in the second sense, but in some cases also included pieces of belles lettres. In this last section I would like to briefly point out how the study of literature in its broad sense—in the case of this article, the study of periodicals—may contribute to an understanding of nineteenth-century literature in its later, autonomous sense, and of the novel in particular. In many ways, I would like to argue, the utopian and dystopian accounts produced by the boom of periodicals within the literary institutions were conditions of possibility for concurrent and later debates on language and the norms of literature.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Latin American literature sought its autonomy through an explicit rejection of journalism; in that context, the low and mercantile writing of newspapers was insistently opposed to the high, artisanal, and auratic one of literature (Ramos 82–111). ‘Poetry is poetry,’ the exiled Cuban José Martí (1853–1895) would write toward the end of his life, thus emphasizing the autonomy of literature (Martí 271). During the first half of the century, however, writers made constant efforts to link periodicals to their own ideal literature. In 1829, for example, José María Heredia, an earlier Cuban émigré, compared the journalistic style of José Joaquín de Mora to ‘a graceful young lady, full of beauty and freshness’ (Miscelánea, periódico crítico y literario, México, September 1829, 35). Heredia was not only writing for periodicals at this time but also in the process of becoming the romantic poet of Cuba (despite his exile, or maybe because of it), and arguably of the entire continent; the fact that he praised the style of a journalist in these terms suggests that this new type of prose was part of a wider transformation in literary writing.

Thus, while the late nineteenth-century literary movement known in Spanish as modernismo has trained Latin Americanists to identify literary autonomy with a rejection of journalism, what I am suggesting here is that during the first half of the century writers channeled their efforts to create new modes of prose and discursive authority precisely through periodicals. In the same way that José Martí would claim that ‘poetry is poetry,’ they repeated over and over again ‘journalism is journalism’—that is, that the language of periodicals was a special kind of language. In this way, they marked the contrast between traditional conditions of written production and those in which they were immersed. The medium, they noticed, simultaneously allowed and imposed a new language.

In lieu of a general conclusion, I would like to point out one of the possible lines of inquiry that analyses of media like the one proposed in this essay may open for the study of literature in its autonomous sense. From the perspective mentioned in the previous paragraph, in effect, the language of high-speed Enlightenment, the language of periodicals, can be related to the most studied literary form of the century: the novel. As in other parts of the world, Latin American novels were often published in periodicals in serialized form, as feuilletons, which covered the lower-part of the page and which were initially devoted to subjects such as fashion or the chronicle of local gossip and theater. Beginning in the 1840s, however, and due to their commercial success, novels became the main content of the feuilleton, and eventually the word ‘feuilleton’ started being used as a synonym for ‘novel.’ Alberto Blest Gana, one of the writers most invested in the feuilleton novel during the nineteenth century, considered it indispensable for the consolidation of a Chilean national culture. When he joined the School of Humanities at the University of
Chile, he defended this relatively new literary genre making recourse to the following arguments:

Whereas for the common people poetry is like the ancient idols whose language was comprehensible only to the priests of pagan worship, the novel, on the contrary, holds a special charm for all kinds of intelligence; its language is accessible to all, it paints pictures each person can understand and apply in his own way, and it brings civilization to the least educated social classes, because of the appeal of its scenes drawn from everyday life and narrated in simple and easy language. (Blest Gana 88)

Blest Gana draws a clear opposition between two languages—the ancient, hermetic one of poetry, and the modern, accessible one of the novel. For those critics who are interested in the novel, this defense of the genre in an institution such as the university constitutes an almost revolutionary episode. As I have noted, however, the opposition between these two languages was not new, but had been articulated for decades within periodicals. Since the end of the eighteenth century, the pages of periodicals had included more or less open denunciations of the ancient languages (Greek and Latin) and of those members of the lettered city, the ‘priests’ who used a language that nobody else could understand; they had also included intense defenses of texts that were varied, accessible and linked to the daily experiences of wider sectors of the population. While outside of the scope of this paper, we might also note the similarities of the criticism directed at both novels and periodicals on account of the degradation they seemed to impose upon morals, knowledge, and language. Thus, the debates around the novel and its link to modern times in which writers such as Blest Gana participated were in a sense the aftermath of the boom of periodicals that occurred during the first decades of the century, and, more broadly, many of the debates on national literatures characteristic of what would be known as the romantic period (from the 1830s onwards) had been actually taking place decades earlier as debates on a new medium—that is, debates on the possibilities and the dangers opened up in the lettered city by periodicals. Framing and analyzing the early nineteenth-century periodical as a new medium, therefore, might be a good point of departure for any analysis that aims at avoiding the modern myth of absolute rupture with the past and at explaining the emergence of literary forms in light of media and cultural history.

Notes

1. Cf. Earle (27–31) and Castro-Klarén (3–53). General accounts of the origins of the periodical press in Latin America can be found in Álvarez, Checa Godoy, and Del Palacio Montiel. For studies that focus on the first decades of the nineteenth century, cf. Staples, Masiello, and Poblete.

2. As Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey Pingree point out, ‘today’s new media are peddled and saluted as the ultimate, the end of media history,’ proposing a historical approach to their newness (Gitelman and Pingree xxii). In the same fashion, Lauren Rabinovitz and Abraham Geil argue that the ‘rhetoric of newness’ surrounding new media can also be understood as a ‘rhetoric of amnesia,’ which in the case of digital media ‘facilitates utopic as well as
dystopic visions of the role of computer technologies’ (Rabinovitz and Geil 2). On the historical origins of the concept of ‘media,’ cf. Guillory.

3. Carolyn Marvin’s *When Old Technologies Were New*, published in 1988, has been called the ‘founding classic’ of new media history (Peters 21). For more recent examples, cf. Bolter, Chun, Gitelman, and Rabinovitz and Geil. The closest examples in the field of Latin American studies are Brown, Gallo, Martín-Barbero, Paz Soldán, and Süsskind. However, none of these focus on the early nineteenth century.

4. On the new as a modern historical category, cf. Chun (3) and Batchen (39).


6. For examples of scholarship that go beyond this descriptive approach, and that include periodicals in broader communication networks, cf. Alonso, Castro-Klarén, Earle, Fornet, Masiello, and Poblete.

7. All translations are mine.

8. Cf. also Peters, who defines new media as ‘media we do not yet know how to talk about’ (Peters 18).


10. Of course, some media—such as pamphlets, folletos, and catecismos—were even cheaper, and in that sense more democratic (Staples 96; Fornet 60).

11. Some historians go as far as to dismiss this democratization altogether (Cruz Soto 422).


13. For a study of this convergence of journalism and narrative fiction during the first half of the nineteenth century in Latin America, cf. González (1–61).


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**Victor Goldgel-Carballo**, Department of Spanish and Portuguese, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1046 Van Hise Hall, 1220 Linden Drive, Madison, WI 53706–1557, USA. E-mail: goldgelcarba@wisc.edu