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A mi madre, ahí; a mi padre, acá.

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## Abstract

The dissertation examines the relations between literary creation and national systems of education in Spanish America, from the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century to the 1940's. Paying special attention to Mexican literature, the dissertation analyzes the prose works by four key Spanish American intellectuals: José Enrique Rodó (1871-1917), Alfonso Reyes (1889-1959), José Vasconcelos (1882-1959) and Jorge Cuesta (1903-1942).

The study begins with the publication of José Enrique Rodó's *Ariel* (1900), the landmark volume that launched the alliance between "high" culture and state-funded education in Spanish America. Then, it deals with works by the two most influential Mexican thinkers of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, both convinced *arielistas*, namely, Alfonso Reyes and José Vasconcelos. Just before the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution, young Reyes and Vasconcelos advanced the need for a humanist reform and the nation's "aesthetic" redemption; over the 1920's and 1930's, as high-ranking intellectuals, both were fundamental in fostering national institutions of education, as well as in promoting the popular and fine arts. The study concludes with the Mexican avant-garde's criticism of aesthetic humanism, seen through Jorge Cuesta's critical works.

I argue that, during these decades, literature in and through national systems of education brought about a specific kind of subject, the "aesthetic subject" - understood both as a self in philosophical terms and as a citizen in political terms. Hence, I show that what was at stake in the important moment of the "aesthetic question" was not merely the doggedly argued issues of national representation or identity. I submit that, as an essential component of national systems of education, aesthetics sought the emergence of a synthetic subject capable of overcoming the division of labor, the fragmentation of skills and the specialization of knowledge in a modern liberal society. That was what aesthetic education always meant: the possibility of transforming

specialists into full human beings through art. Thus, the Spanish America's aesthetic obsession, which was the distinctive intellectual mark of an era, constituted but an episode of that older and larger cultural project that went back to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: aesthetic humanism.

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## Introduction. Aesthetic Humanism in Spanish America

*Aesthetic Matters: Humanism, Literature and Education*, examines the relations between literary production and national systems of education in Spanish America, from the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century to the 1940's. Paying special attention to Mexican literature, the dissertation analyzes the prose works by four key Spanish American intellectuals: José Enrique Rodó, Alfonso Reyes, José Vasconcelos and Jorge Cuesta.

The dissertation begins right at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, with the publication of *Ariel* (1900), the landmark volume that launched the alliance between “high” culture and state-funded education in Spanish America. Then, I examine the works of the two most influential Mexican thinkers of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, both convinced arielistas, namely, Alfonso Reyes and José Vasconcelos. Just before the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution, young Reyes and Vasconcelos advanced the need for a humanist revolution and the nation's “aesthetic” redemption; over the 1920's and 1930's, as consolidated and high-ranking intellectuals, both were fundamental in fostering national institutions of education, as well as in promoting the popular and fine arts. In turn, I conclude the dissertation with a careful rumination of Jorge Cuesta's critique of aesthetic humanism. In this sense, I advance Cuesta as the grand inquisitor of *arielismo*'s humanist utopia.

I argue that, during these decades, the relation between literature and national systems of education brought about a specific kind of subject, understood both as a philosophical being and as a political citizen, who I, in brief, call the “aesthetic” subject. Hence, I show that what was at stake in the aesthetic question was not merely a matter of national representation or national

identity – as has been differently argued by both Guillermo Sheridan and Ignacio Sánchez Prado.<sup>1</sup> I show that, as an essential component of national systems of education, aesthetics sought the emergence of a synthetic subject, capable of overcoming the division of labor, the fragmentation of skills and the specialization of knowledge in a modern liberal society. That was what aesthetic education meant: the possibility of transforming specialists into full human beings through art. In such a way, I submit that Spanish America’s aesthetic obsession, which was the distinctive intellectual mark of an era – from Rodó to Cuesta, or for that matter to Gabriela Mistral, Octavio Paz, and José Revueltas –, constituted but an episode of that older and larger cultural project that went back to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: aesthetic humanism.

My dissertation seeks to critically deal with this project, by investigating its historical foundations and its theoretical principles. Thus, I seek to understand the particular social, cultural and political contingencies out of which Spanish American aesthetic humanism emerged. To be sure, since the last three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century and up to the 1940s, the development of national systems of education in Spanish America was the gravitational force that granted union and direction to these contingencies.

In turn, the dissertation’s historical critique aims to yield a conceptual appraisal, so as to understand the creation of subjects at schools. Therefore, I argue that “aesthetics” entailed an erotic relation between literature (and other forms of art) and students’ desire, which, in turn, resulted in an aesthetics of writing and reading; that is, in the emergence of a specific literary language. In

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<sup>1</sup> See both Guillermo Sheridan, *México en 1932: La polémica nacionalista* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999) and Ignacio Sánchez Prado, *Naciones Intelectuales* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2009).



this sense, the aesthetic subject emerged out of the dialectic between literary language and the student's desire.

Before moving on, however, a brief consideration of the history of aesthetics as a modern conception of the arts is in order.

### *I. Aesthetics, between the Market and the School*

Although it will be impossible to provide a thorough panorama, we must still attempt to clarify "aesthetics" historicity. For "aesthetics" cannot be conceived as a trans-historical category, nor can it be reduced to related, but not identical concepts such as "beauty," "art" or "culture." Bluntly stated: there is no "aesthetics" before Europe's 18<sup>th</sup> century, even though the term could be traced to Plato's times. As Howard Caygill shows, the emergence of the "aesthetic" as an artistic, academic and, ultimately, public preoccupation was intimately linked to the emergence of theories of "civil society" and "political economy" during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, mainly in England, France and Germany.<sup>2</sup> For Caygill, "aesthetics" responded to the need of establishing a place for cultural objects within the new commodity market and the secular order. This historical context made thinkable, on the one hand, the ideas of British moral philosophers, their theory of 'Taste' as a new logic of cultural consumption; on the other, the 'aesthetics' of such German philosophers as Kant and Hegel and their concern with the role of art in the secular order of universities and the State.

From the notion of "Taste" to that of "aesthetics" there are not only continuities but also significant breaks. In *The Invention of Art* (2001), Larry Shiner argues that

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Caygill, *Art of Judgment* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1989). For a brilliant development of Caygill's argument, see the last chapter in John Guillory's *Cultural Capital* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), "The Discourse of Value: from Adam Smith to Barbara Herrnstein Smith," where Guillory historicizes the emergence of "aesthetic value" in relation to discussions of "use value" and "exchange value" in 18<sup>th</sup>-century classical political economy.

crucial difference between taste and the aesthetic is that taste has always been an irremediably social concept, concerned as much with food, dress, and manners as with the beauty or meaning of art” and that “[i]n the old system of art, pleasure, as well as use, was conceived of instrumentally; the pleasures of the arts provided diversions and amusements that contributed to health and civic peace [...] But once the new system of fine arts versus craft had been codified [...] the fine were said to be the object of a higher, contemplative pleasure.<sup>3</sup>

The break glossed by Caygill and Shiner, I believe, happened less at the level of theory than through sociological circumstance. That is, it took place “en el cambio de tipo de hombre que acaece en la producción de las actividades del espíritu,” to borrow the words of Mexican critic Jorge Cuesta. Indeed, it is a commonplace to point out that the term “aesthetics,” in its modern sense, first appeared in Alexander Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* (1750-1758). And yet, it would be more accurate to state that the concept of “aesthetics” first emerged in a specific institutional context: the modern German university. Indeed, *Aesthetica* was Baumgarten’s master’s thesis at the University of Halle-Wittenberg. This institutional context determined his understanding of the “sensate discourse” of poetry, his concern with the logic of “sensible perceptions.” For him, thus, aesthetics implied a “higher, contemplative pleasure,” to use Shiner’s words. Previous examiners of good taste – mainly English and French: the Earl of Shaftesbury, Anne-Thérèse de Lambert, Joseph Addison, Edmund Burke, David Hume, Abbé Dubos – belonged to ‘polite’ society. They were noblemen, politicians, diplomats, hostesses of literary salons. They wrote for the ‘public’ in order to advance refinement in manners and customs. The goal of good taste was refined pleasure; by contrast, since Baumgarten, the object of aesthetics became “a special mode of knowing.” Thus, of the emergence of aesthetics as a modern discourse on the arts, it can be said that it constituted

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<sup>3</sup> Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), 132.

the admission and accommodation of the notion of taste to the institutional structure of the modern university.<sup>4</sup>

To this day, aesthetics is still conventionally considered the science or philosophy of beauty. M. H. Abrams defined it as “a mode of knowledge that possesses its own kind of ‘perfection’ – a perfection specific to sensory discourse, which can be validated by criteria that are counterparts of the criteria by which we validate the logical process for achieving intellectual perfection or ‘truth.’”<sup>5</sup> And yet, the effort to make beauty and the arts matters of scholarly investigation –i.e., the effort to reconcile the “criteria that are the counterparts of the criteria by which we validate the logical process” in the production of truth – had been challenging from the outset. Think of Kant. What was the “special mode of knowing,” to use Baumgarten’s formulation, advanced by Kantian aesthetics? For Kant, aesthetic knowledge could never refer to the real qualities of an object: “...judgments of that [aesthetic] kind have no bearing upon the object.” If they did, they would constitute conceptual rather than aesthetic knowledge. This, however, did not mean that the predicate of *beauty* was empty. Rather, it meant that aesthetic judgments revealed something not about the object that passively receives it, but about the subject who enunciated it. Aesthetic judgements, thus, revealed the “harmonious free play” of understanding and imagination (in the Kantian sense of receiver of perceptions). In science, imagination and understanding worked in tandem to conceive concepts that are true vis-à-vis certain objects; in aesthetics, imagination and understanding were indifferent to the reality of their object, conceiving it rather as pure *form*, as “purposiveness without purpose.” Thus, as Jan Mieszkowski has recently argued,

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<sup>4</sup> For a great analysis of British Moral philosophy, its theory of taste, and its place in the development of aesthetics, see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), especially chapter two: “The Law of the Heart: Shaftesbury, Hume, Burke.”

<sup>5</sup> M.H. Abrams, “Art-as-such: The sociology of Modern Aesthetics,” in *Doing things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory* (New York: Norton, 1991), 174.

what every aesthetic judgment postulates (from the Latin *postulare*: “to demand, to request”) is the faculty of judgment itself, the possibility of harmony between imagination and understanding that makes all other forms and objects of knowledge possible. For Kant, then, aesthetics did not result in objective knowledge (knowledge of an object), but rather constituted the judging and knowing subject herself.<sup>6</sup>

The Kantian paradoxes were exploited to their full extent in Friedrich Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795). It is barely remembered that Schiller was appointed professor of History and Philosophy at the University of Jena in 1798, though he was a physician by profession.<sup>7</sup> But his civilizing endeavor predates his entry into academia, for the *Letters* were dedicated to his patron, the duke of Augustenburg, who must have been pleased to read Schiller’s negative views of the French Revolution and his ideas on aesthetic education as the antidote for political violence.<sup>8</sup> Schiller reformulated Kantian language. For Schiller, there is indeed harmony in art, yet it does not refer to imagination and understanding; rather, what must now be brought together is man’s “spiritual” and “sensuous drive.” Hence, aesthetic education ought to heal every individual’s inner fraction, producing a total, integral subject. But there was nothing metaphysical or religious about individual fragmentation: “it was culture itself that wounded modern humanity in this way.” For Schiller,

[o]n the one hand, the extension of empirical knowledge and sharper thinking rendered a more precise distinction of the sciences necessary, while on the other the elaborate machinery of the state demanded a more consistent separation of ranks and occupations;

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<sup>6</sup> Jan Mieszkowski, *Labors of Imagination: Aesthetics and Political Economy from Kant to Althusser* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006). See also Eagleton, *The Ideology*, “The Kantian Imaginary.”

<sup>7</sup> Some of his colleagues at the University of Jena included Johan Gottlieb Fichte, F.W.J Schelling, Friedrich Scheler and G.W.F. Hegel.

<sup>8</sup> Schiller’s ideas on aesthetic education had in this sense a great influence on late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish American pedagogues. Some fragments of his work, accompanied by a biographical tale, were published by Cuban scholar José de la Luz y Caballero in 1822. They were also central to the pedagogic projects of José Martí and José Enrique Rodó.

the inner unity of human nature was torn apart, and a ruinous dispute set its harmonious powers at odds.<sup>9</sup>

In this scenario, only the arts could originate the space for re-collection, provided it were “true” art - aesthetics: “In a truly successful work of Art the contents should effect nothing, the form everything, for only through form is the whole man affected...”<sup>10</sup> Thus, to avoid becoming specialized knowledge by expressing a particular content, the pedagogic efficacy of art resided in its aesthetic dimension, the *totality* of its form. Only this totality could affect – effect, we should rather say – a total subject.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, I believe that the relationship between a rapidly expanding commodity-market and the emergence of “aesthetics” as a critical and artistic praxis (as advanced by Caygill and Guillory) must be mediated by the imperatives of another social institution: the modern, secular school.<sup>12</sup> That is, aesthetics emerges not only to define and produce a particular art-object in the commodity-market, but also to posit a form of symbolic reproduction, or the symbolic production of subjects through art. And this symbolic production took place at institutions of higher education. Schools, to be sure, had always been related to the market – there is a clear analogy between the division of labor in the market and the specialization of knowledges and skills at schools. But the analogy is not perfect. As Gramsci pointed out commenting on Italy’s 19<sup>th</sup>-century *liceo*, schools are ultimately determined by their *pedagogic* principle, by which certain disciplines are studied, rather than for their practical content, for their capabilities of developing citizens’ personalities and tools for governance – for Gramsci, this was the goal of a curriculum based on Classical

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<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 18.

<sup>10</sup> Schiller, 155.

<sup>11</sup> Schiller’s aesthetic education has received a 21st-century revival through the work of French philosopher Jacques Rancière. See *The politics of aesthetics: the distribution of the sensible* (New York: Continuum, 2006) and *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> The most ambitious effort to prode a total system of disciplines, in which the aesthetic was included, was, of course, Hegel, not only in his posthumous *Lectures in Aesthetics* (1835), but also in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline* (1817).

Antiquity. This is all the more so if we consider that, throughout history, schools have commonly depended on the Church, the monarchy and its patrons, and the State – institutions that, in turn, depended on schools not only to exert their civilizing influence, but also to form the subjects needed by the advancement of the beneficiary’s interest, as Louis Althusser famously argued.<sup>13</sup>

The entrance and, as it were, ecological adaptation of the notion of taste to the environment of modern universities – i.e., aesthetics – meant art’s articulation to both the specialization of empirical knowledge and the liberal professions. Aesthetics’ accommodation to the academic milieu, however, followed Derrida’s logic of the supplement: as an appendix that supplied the missing piece within the system of specialized knowledges and professions. And yet, if a piece was found missing, doesn’t that denote its need all along? In other words, what comes after is greater because it existed before? – to paraphrase the Biblical saying.<sup>14</sup> By supplementing specialized knowledges and professions, aesthetics became their foundation and presupposition, the element that *holds it all together* – Gramsci’s pedagogical principle. This is precisely what the ambition of aesthetic education has meant since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century; namely, the transformative aesthetic experience as the remaking of the wholeness (individually and collectively) of subjects who otherwise were, in Schillers work, a “mere reflection of their post and knowledges.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, aesthetic education implied a new mode of cultural production and consumption. The utmost value of the object was to be a *formal totality*, able to synthesize and harmonize all specific contents. In turn, the aesthetic experience was conceived as a form of harmony that overcame the fragmentation of knowledge and skills –it was the event out of which

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<sup>13</sup> See *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (London: Verso, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Grammatology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976).

<sup>15</sup> Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*, 20.

arose a synthetic subject. It was through this subject that the social harmony of the modern, fragmented *polis* could be achieved. This has been, strictly speaking, a humanist aesthetics.

Commenting on Baumgarten's transition from taste to aesthetics, Larry Shiner remarks that "there has been an equivocation from the beginning between the broad use of 'aesthetic' for any sort of value system having to do with art or beauty and 'the aesthetic' as a special form of disinterested knowledge, uniting feeling and reason."<sup>16</sup> The ambiguity, I would argue, derived from aesthetics' place between the commodity-market and schools. Over the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, two forms of aesthetics were elaborated: "criticism," in its Kantian, scholarly sense; and "critique," in the sense of, say, Charles Baudelaire. France is a great example of the tension between these two forms of aesthetics. Already in 1855, amidst the Universal Exposition, Baudelaire mocked 18<sup>th</sup>-century professors of aesthetics:

what would a modern Winckelmann (we are full of them, the nation is bursting with them and lazy people adore them) – what, I say, would a modern Winckelmann do, what would he say, at the sight of a Chinese product, a strange product, weird, contorted in shape, intense in colour, and sometimes delicate to the point of fading away? And yet this object is a sample of universal beauty.<sup>17</sup>

For the critic to appreciate universal beauty –the expansion of commodity market – she had to give up her "academic eye" and thus see with "no scholastic veil, no academic paradox, no pedagogic utopia." Baudelaire represents the birth of modern literary critique because he offered an answer, not to scholarship's repetition-bent logic, but to the market's strange, novel, tempting calls. Rather than the constitution of synthetic subjects, critique implied a higher degree of spiritual flexibility, so as to enjoy "universal beauty" (the work of art as commodity, in the words of Giorgio

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<sup>16</sup> Shiner, *Invention of art*, 146.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "The Universal Exhibition of 1855," in *Selected writings on art and literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992).

Agamben<sup>18</sup>): “if it is to be understood [the sample of universal beauty], the critic, the viewer, must bring about within himself a transformation, which is something of a mystery, and, by a phenomenon of will-power acting on his imagination, must learn by his own effort to share in the life of the society that has given birth to this unexpected bloom.” Hence, the critic must accommodate the self to the individual reality of the object, rather than the other way around. By abandoning his pedagogic eye, Baudelaire opened the experience of the unexpected.<sup>19</sup>

And yet, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century France was also the site of a great revival of aesthetics as a “special mode of knowledge.” Whereas Baumgarten’s “special mode of knowledge” originated as a form of sensuousness, the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century witnessed the emergence of “idealist aesthetics” *tout court*. “Idealism” was a reaction against the century’s “utilitarianism” and “materialism” – ideals that found their counterparts in positivist systems of national education, which at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, unlike in Kant and Schiller’s times, fully belonged to the State. Thus, as public education expanded in France throughout the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, an anxiety started to rise amongst public servants, scholars and intellectuals: the *masses*. The *masses* were never barbaric – on the contrary, they had been educated, but only in view to their social position, their specialized skills. It was the mass of bureaucrats, professionals, workers and technicians which higher education was feeding and creating through positivism’s paradox – the fact it had assigned Gramsci’s educational principle to the sciences, rather than the arts. Science was nothing but the continual demand for further specialization and could not accomplish synthetic subjects. This is the moment of works such as Ernest Renan’s *La Réforme Intellectuelle et Morale de la France*

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<sup>18</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), particularly the section “Baudelaire; or, The Absolute Commodity.”

<sup>19</sup> In this sense, critique as the self-transforming praxis of the unexpected is opposed to criticism’s “systems,” which, for Baudelaire, narcissistically identify the individual life of objects with the totality of its own scholarly purpose. See, again, “The Universal Exhibition of 1855.”



(1871); Jean Marie Guyau's *Problèmes de l'esthétique contemporain* (1884) and *L'Art au point de vue sociologique* (1889); and Alfred Fouille's *Le Mouvement positiviste et la conception sociologique du monde* (1896) and *Le Mouvement idéaliste et la réaction contre la science positive* (1896), to name but a few. That is, the aesthetic as a critical and literary praxis was again appropriated by the academy and thus by the State – it became, once more, an aesthetic humanism concerned with the production of synthetic subjects.<sup>20</sup> In France, as in many Spanish American nations, positivism was the allure of two contradictory utopias: science and humanist citizenship.

It would be impossible to trace the modern notion of aesthetics in its various renderings. I have here presented a conceptual and historical schema of aesthetics, not as a unitary discourse, but as divided between two modern institutions: the secular school and the liberal market. Now, in so far as aesthetics has dealt with producing and experiencing art in a liberal order, its meaning must be articulated in relation to these two institutions: the artwork as commodity and the artwork as synthetic subject. The two poles, however, are not radically distinct; there is an analogy, not a perfect one, even less an identity, between the division of labor in the market and the specialization of science and the liberal professions in the University. They *do* pose meaningful differences: different conceptions of aesthetic 'value,' for example, or different ways of conceiving art (as refined pleasure or as knowledge). They seek different kinds of aesthetic experiences: the self-transformative effort of the unexpected; the harmonious moment of synthetic identity. And they certainly implied different artistic practices. For aesthetics was never merely an interpretative, but decidedly prescriptive endeavor. Schiller not only wrote for his patron, the duke of Augustenburg, but also for the young Goethe; Baudelaire worked to furnish his own poetry with the same

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<sup>20</sup> If we wish to look outside of France, we should look no further than (poet, critic, inspector of schools, promotor of state-funded secondary education) Matthew Arnolds's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) which was an essential read for Dominican critic and pedagogue Pedro Henríquez Ureña.

“strange,” “weird,” “contorted” beauty of the commodity; and late 19<sup>th</sup>-century aesthetic idealism found its late literary hero in none other than Romain Rolland, whose ten-volume novel *Jean-Christophe* narrated the epic of constituting a synthetic subject. Finally, these two kinds of aesthetics posed two different social positions for the artist within the liberal order: the “professional,” who writes from his place in the commodity-market; and the “teacher,” who writes from his place in the educational system. The 20<sup>th</sup>-century would inherit and, in many ways, transform this schema.

## *II. Aesthetics Humanism in Spanish America: Liberalism, Modernism, Specialization*

To the extent of my knowledge, aesthetic humanism was officially introduced into the Spanish speaking world by Catalan philologist Manuel Milá y Fontanals (1818-1884). In 1857, as a professor at the Universidad de Barcelona, Milá y Fontanals published *Principios de estética o de Teoría de lo Bello*, with the subtitle “Preliminar del curso de literatura.” In a later text, *Principios de teoría estética y literaria* (1869), Milá y Fontanals wrote that “la literatura es el estudio de la belleza en general y el de las composiciones verbales”<sup>21</sup> and defined its object of study, literature, in three ways: as a science, “es decir, como consignación de hechos históricos y principios teóricos;” as aesthetic education, “ó sea, como cultivo del juicio y del sentimiento de lo bello;” and as art, “es decir, como consignación de los principios prácticos que pueden servir de guía en la composición de obras literarias.”<sup>22</sup> His work initiated a discussion that involved science, beauty and education and that would endure for the next hundred years, branching out of academia into literary criticism, urban chronicles and cultural journalism.

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<sup>21</sup> Manuel Milá i Fontanals, *Principios de teoría estética y literaria* (Barcelona: Imprenta del diario de Barcelona, 1869), 7.

<sup>22</sup> Milá i Fontanals, 8.

Of course, Milá y Fontanals greatest contributions to the discipline of “aesthetics” were two of his students: philologist Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo (1856-1912) and pedagogue Francisco Giner de los Ríos (1839-1915). In a sense, each of them developed a facet of aesthetics outlined by their professor: Menéndez y Pelayo wrote, from 1883 to 1889, a voluminous, almost unreadable history of the emergence of “aesthetics” as a modern science, *Historia de las ideas estéticas en España*; Giner de los Ríos created, in 1876, the *Instituto Libre de Enseñanza*, a pedagogic institution that basically involved every important Spanish-speaking intellectual and artist before the Civil War, from Leopoldo Alas “Clarín” (1852-1901) - friend, enthusiast and promoter of José Enrique Rodó’s *Ariel* in Spanish circles - to the generation of American exiles which included Pedro Salinas (1891-1951) and María Zambrano (1904-1991), through the likes José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) and Eugenio d’Ors (1881-1954).<sup>23</sup> Another exile, the Mexican Alfonso Reyes, would get to know the institute’s *Residencia de Estudiantes*, an experience described in a piece of “Cartones de Madrid” (1917) dedicated to Ginés de los Ríos.<sup>24</sup>

But, again, the trans-Atlantic connections created through aesthetics between Spain and Spanish American intellectuals, or, for that matter, between Spanish America and France (Henri Bergson is but the most visible example), lie outside the scope of my dissertation, although they will be referenced at specific points. Here, I circumscribe my object of study to the case of late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century aesthetic humanism in Spanish America, with a special focus on Mexico. As I tried to show in the previous section, aesthetic humanism emerged in the context of

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<sup>23</sup> For an amicable approximation to the five monumental volumes published by Madrid’s Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas in 1962, see *Historia de las ideas estéticas en España: Estudios* (Santander: Universidad de Cantabria, 2010). For a brief exposure to Giner de los Ríos pedagogic thought, see his *Ensayos* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1969). See also Solomon Lipp, *Francisco Giner de los Ríos: a Spanish Socrates* (Waterloo, Ont: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1985).

<sup>24</sup> Alfonso Reyes, “Las vísperas de España,” in *Obras Completas II* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1955). “Cartones de Madrid” was included in “Las vísperas de España,” along with other miscellaneous writings on Spain.

an expanding commodity market and the development of national institutions of education – that is, the new kinds of knowledges, skills, and labor demanded by modern liberalism, both economic and cultural. A first wave of German aesthetic humanism was represented by Schiller, Goethe and the Weimar cultural ideal; a second wave, of European dimension, rose during the last three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century as a reaction against the positivist curriculum and the “utilitarian” character of bourgeois society. Spanish American aesthetic humanism is contemporaneous with this second wave of “aesthetic idealism” – it is both an influence and influenced by this second moment, especially in relation its French and Spanish variations. As I will argue, its emblematic text was José Enrique Rodó’s *Ariel* (1900), which articulated an organic relation between the State and literary production, mediated by the imperatives of national institutions of education, which would be echoed through Spanish America for (at least) the next three decades.

But, in order to approach Spanish American aesthetic humanism, we must first revisit the work of two experts on late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish American literature: the Uruguayan Ángel Rama and the Puerto Rican Julio Ramos. Indeed, as crucial scholars of Spanish American *modernismo*, both of them dealt with many of the issues present in *Aesthetic Matters*. Their works – I will briefly discuss Rama’s *Rubén Darío y el modernismo* (1970) and Ramos *Desencuentros de la modernidad en América Latina* (1989) – represent insightful attempts to explore the ways *modernismo* registered the emergence of a liberal order, which included a literary market (or lack of) and the development of national institutions of education. Rama focused on Darío’s *Prosas profanas* (1896) in order to study the effects of the liberal market in Latin-American poetry – the new poetic values were “subjectivism,” “novelty” and “originality,” all part of an *ethos* of

competition.<sup>25</sup> Elaborating on certain questions posed by Rama's interpretation of *modernismo*, Ramos' study centers on the works of Cuban essayist, poet and revolutionary José Martí, in order to trace the emergence of a specifically artistic "discursive field," founded on an artistic "principle of authority," the "aesthetic," which informed a particular "literary subject." In this sense, both their arguments engaged (directly, in Julio Ramos' case) the fundamental conditions which called for the emergence of aesthetic humanism, the alliance between aesthetic culture and the State preached by Próspero in Rodó's *Ariel*.

In *Rubén Darío y el modernismo*, Ángel Rama sought to explain how Latin-American (a category Rama prefers to Spanish American) literature incorporated "la economía y la literatura del liberalismo" through "el subjetivismo" of Darío's poetry: "Tal subjetivismo era la norma de la economía liberal que se había desarrollado en los grandes centros americanos del XIX, modelando a los hombres a su imagen y semejanza."<sup>26</sup> By subjectivism, Rama refers to "una exasperación del yo," an isolation of the self from the world as a social totality, an isolation that promotes the self's claim of being absolutely singular, original. Thus, the key to understand *modernista* poetry "es la 'subjetivación' ascendida a valor único [...] <<Mi poesía es mía en mí>> dijo [Darío] en *Prosas Profanas*."<sup>27</sup>

And yet, "subjectivation" did not imply for Rama (or Darío) the translucent expression of the poet's feelings – quite the contrary. What Darío shows is that the "subjectivation" of poetry implied a distinction based on each poet's mastery over poetic technique, particularly over meter. Thus, originality was the opposite of sincerity - it meant that "las formas literarias [...] entran en

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<sup>25</sup> It might be an unorthodox position, but I consider this early effort a fresher, adventurous and more insightful approximation to Darío's poetry than Rama's posthumous work, *Las máscaras democráticas del modernismo* (Montevideo: Fundación Ángel Rama, 1985).

<sup>26</sup> Rama, *Rubén Darío y el modernismo* (Caracas: Alfadil Ediciones, 1985), 13.

<sup>27</sup> Rama, 12.

una vertiginosa elaboración personal.”<sup>28</sup> Each poet would produce a distinct poetic object, or rather a series of objects whose distinction depended on a “patente de fabricación” – the author’s originality, its unique value.<sup>29</sup> For Rama, hence, *Prosas profanas* “reivindica la literatura como un coto cerrado, sólo para especialistas” capable of distinguishing poetry’s various and unique “patentes de fabricación.”<sup>30</sup>

For Rama, then, “subjectivism” was, strictly, a demand of the market. Indeed, Rama posed a relation between Darío’s desire for a “vertiginosa elaboración personal” of poetry and the professionalization of the artist in relation to the commodity-market:

Con el movimiento modernista dentro del cual se sitúa Darío, comienza, sino una profesionalización del artista, que por el momento era impensable, una especialización que la incipiente complejidad de algunas sociedades hispanoamericanas acarrea, al generar personalidades consagradas a esa multiplicidad de tareas que antes recaían sobre el vate.<sup>31</sup>

At a first glance, the sameness of “subjectivity” and “professionalization” seems rather paradoxical. But the paradox in fact belongs to the workings of the cultural market:

La subjetivación refuerza el criterio de la semejanza de los hombres, abre el camino hacia la originalidad como principio – como incendio – de la creación, y aspira a que ella funcionando como verdadera “patente de fabricación”, sea preservada de toda imitación, resulte irreplicable en el mercado.<sup>32</sup>

With Darío, poetry acquires “novelty” and “originality,” characteristics of the “subjectivist” liberal economy.

By overlapping the practices of writing and judging poetry with the new conditions of the market, Darío was, Rama believed, the first to introduce a properly aesthetic criteria in Spanish American letters. But I reckon Rama’s argument should be handled with care. For what we find in

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<sup>28</sup> Rama, 17.

<sup>29</sup> Rama, 16.

<sup>30</sup> Rama, 47.

<sup>31</sup> Rama, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Rama, 16.

Darío's poetry is not the market, but a desire for it. What else does Darío's "El rey burgués" narrate but the poet's miserable situation in the market? Furthermore, many of Darío's books were published thanks to private patrons. Rama was aware of this contradiction between, on the one hand, the rules of capitalism and, on the other, the actual absence of a cultural market in Spanish America. But he never resolves the contradiction, though he best expressed it in his reading of Pedro Henríquez Ureña's *Las Corrientes literarias en la América Hispana*. Rama quotes Henríquez Ureña to prove that modern poetry is fundamentally determined by the division of labor:

Comenzó una división del trabajo. Los hombres de profesiones intelectuales trataron ahora de ceñirse a la tarea que habían elegido y abandonaron la política; los abogados, como de costumbre, menos y después que los demás. El timón del Estado pasó a manos de quienes no eran sino políticos; nada se ganó con ello, antes al contrario. Y como la literatura no era en realidad una profesión, sino una vocación, los hombres de letras se convirtieron en periodistas o maestros, cuando no en ambas cosas.<sup>33</sup>

From this passage, Rama concludes: "No se trata del exclusive abandono de la política [...] sino del abandono de todas las funciones educativas e ideológicas que hasta ese momento conllevaba la poesía."<sup>34</sup> A surprising conclusion, given that Henríquez Ureña writes that poetry was never a profession, but a vocation, and men of letters had to take refuge in schools or newspapers! So there remains an unresolved ambiguity between a real and a desired market; Rama wrote of the emergence of the market, the knowledge of its laws, the division of labor, only to immediately discuss the *modernistas*' disenchantment with the lack of a public. If we take Rama's argument to its rigorous conclusion, Darío did not accommodate to the market through his specialized poetry, but instead sought to *create* the market and the public that would recognize the value of his specialized poetry. Specialization was but an uncompleted effort towards professionalization, and the market was present in Darío's poetry in the form of an absence, of a desire.

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<sup>33</sup> Rama, 45.

<sup>34</sup> Rama, 45.

Julio Ramos' *Desencuentros de la modernidad* may be read as a brilliant elaboration of certain concerns raised by Rama's reading of Darío's *modernismo*. Ramos tells the sort of Weberian story of rationalization in and of Latin-America throughout the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, focusing on the adventures of the "literary subject" in its quest for autonomy –that is, for its particular mode of knowledge, which was also its specific form of social authority. Unlike Rama, however, his emblematic case is not Darío, but Cuban poet José Martí. The change of protagonist implies no small break between Rama's and Ramos' accounts of *modernismo*, liberalism and the division of labor. For Rama, Darío (like Baudelaire) fashioned his poetry as an answer to the commodity-market, thus made it contorted, refined, strange, seductive. Darío was a modern "literary subject" because he concocted specialized objects – he opted less for the romantic expression of feelings than for the personal vertigo of meter and rhythm. Martí, on the other hand, emerged as a "literary subject" *against* "los discursos disciplinados de la racionalización" – emerged as the product of a discursive field, culture, where "discipline" and "rationalization" could be criticized and counterbalanced.

Martí's poetry constituted a relatively autonomous "literary subject" through the enunciation of a kind specific knowledge. Commenting on Martí's *Ismaelillo*, Ramos writes: "...su enunciación poética se produce desde un campo discursivo ya diferenciado de los discursos disciplinados de la racionalización. El *Ismaelillo*, presupone *otro* saber – el del 'niño', el de la visión, a veces onírica - como lugar de lo específicamente imaginario..."<sup>35</sup> For Ramos, the specificity of dreams and the child's vision is, paradoxically, their difference from "los discursos disciplinados de la racionalización." What is, however, the differentiated discursive field which allows for this alternative poetic enunciation? Ramos calls it "the margins" - the areas of

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<sup>35</sup> Julio Ramos, *Desencuentros de la modernidad* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989), 55.



experience excluded from modern rationalization, its detritus rather than its reverse, which Martí, like Dr. Frankenstein, reassembled into a literary subject. For Ramos, Martí's thought could only have been articulated from the "margins," from his character as revolutionary, exile, journalist, poet and pedagogue. His ideas existed *in between* the disciplined discourses of rationalization. Unlike early Darío, that specialized maker of poems-commodities, Martí's poetry incarnates a subjectivity that strove to transcend modern rationalization. Martí as a poet is not a specialist, but a hero and a teacher: "el poeta ve la juntura [...] armonizando las diferentes facultades que la especialización disgregaba y ponía en contradicción."<sup>36</sup>

Julio Ramos' account of both Latin-American "rationalization" and the emergence of (an uneven) literary modernity concludes with Martí's paradoxical triumph: the "literary subject" produced at the "margin" of rationalization, and thus as a critique of modernity, is institutionalized. This happens through the work of José Enrique Rodó's *Ariel* and its impact on national schools all throughout Spanish America:

Esta retórica anticipa la emergencia del arielismo, momento en que el sujeto literario – ligado a la defensa del 'espíritu' latinoamericano contra el poder 'material de ellos' – lograría desplazar al positivismo de su lugar rector en la educación, *institucionalizando* el 'margen' de la literatura como crítica de la modernización.<sup>37</sup>

Martí's poetic reaction to rationalization and fragmentation – the vision of childhood and dreams – is turned into a full, institutionally-conscious pedagogic theory. Ramos writes:

La literatura emerge como disciplina universitaria, paradójicamente, criticando la especialización, legitimándose a base de un concepto aurático de 'cultura' como esfera donde podía reconstruirse el 'hombre integral,' fragmentado en la cotidianidad moderna por la especialización. Ese concepto de la 'cultura' es una matriz del *Ariel*, que tendría enorme influencia sobre las prácticas pedagógicas de las primeras tres décadas del siglo XX.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ramos, 213.

<sup>37</sup> Ramos, 60.

<sup>38</sup> Ramos, footnote, page 62.

As a “university discipline,” literature was an actual *indiscipline*, which is to say: a discursive field where the critique of “los discursos disciplinados de la racionalización” could happen. In this sense, it was but a subjective antidote (Ramos calls it a form of therapy) for the fragmentation of everyday life. I would call it a linguistic antidote. For Ramos, “el *Ariel* registra la institucionalización de una autoridad que en Martí operaba aún de modo desigual y contradictorio.”<sup>39</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup>-century adventures of the “literary subject” thus traced a path from the unknown margins to institutional recognition, like in the tale of an ancient mythical hero.

In relation to the cultural and political project I have named aesthetic humanism, it is fertile to read Rama and Ramos with and of each other. In a way, Ramos’ book was both an homage and a challenge to Rama’s work. Ramos himself considered the adventures of the “literary subject” as a nuanced alternative to Rama’s history of ‘letrados.’ At the same time, Rama’s view on *modernismo* serves to underline the intangibility of *Desencuentros*’ literary subject. Rama saw in Darío the mastery of poetic technique and the ability to produce a specific, irreproducible kind of linguistic object within the commodity-market. By contrast, Ramos’ concern was not with a particular kind of object but with a particular kind of *discourse*; that is, with the way a field of

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<sup>39</sup> Ramos, 216. The institutionalization of Martí – the displacement of the critique of modernity from the ‘margins’ to the ‘center’ – is less momentous than it appears. In this case, it seems to me that Ramos places too much emphasis on Martí’s marginality. The Cuban poet’s adventures undoubtedly gave him an original point of view, but there is no need to invoke them to explain his conception of poetry as “la juntura” of different faculties. Cuban scholar José de la Luz y Caballero, who Martí greatly admired, had much earlier published extracts from Schiller’s biography and fragments from the *Letters for the Aesthetic Education of Men*. Again, without denying any of Martí’s originality, his conception of poetry and the function of the literary subject falls strictly in line with the aesthetic humanism, active since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, we discussed in the previous section. His love of Emerson – who, in “The American Scholar” (in 1837, fifty years before Martí) wrote that “[t]he state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters, - a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man” – is but one more example. The distance between Martí and Rodó was not that great – in all his wanderings the Cuban was always a pedagogue, a “maker of men” (which he believed was Luz y Caballero’s great lesson to Cuban intellectuals).<sup>39</sup> In this sense, also, he was not that different from Sarmiento or Bello. And it is not an exaggeration to say that Martí embarked on his suicidal revolution with the hopes of establishing – *institutionalizing* – something like the aesthetic Spanish America Rodó dreamt about.

“knowledge” informs a particular subject. For Ramos, the subject was fundamentally a *discursive* reality. Paradoxically, this emphasis on *discourse* as an analytical category obscured the concrete praxis of aesthetics as a modern *literary language* – a concern which was at the center of Rama’s minute (and even loving) approach to Darío’s poetry. Ramos’ ‘discursive field’ advanced a mystical union between a ‘subject’ and a ‘site of enunciation’ – a unity whose linguistic bindings are never quite explained, but presupposed by the very category of ‘discourse.’

### *III. Aesthetic Matters: Humanism, Literature and Education in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Mexico*

The story I tell in *Aesthetic Matters* is less about the irruption of the liberal market in Spanish America, or about the emergence of a “field” and its “relative autonomy” (nor an artistic “regime,” as Jacques Rancière’s re-conceptualized aesthetics in the 21<sup>st</sup>- century<sup>40</sup>) than it is about the workings of a cultural and political project with a long-standing history: aesthetic humanism. As previously stated, aesthetic humanism was a secular project in which “culture,” understood as “high art,” took on the school’s strictly *pedagogic* function, namely, the symbolic making of subjects. From its outset, modern specialization of knowledges and division of labor were the *bête noir* of aesthetic humanism. And yet, aesthetic humanism was only *mediately* determined by the emergence of the commodity-market. Instead, it was directly linked to the demands of specific institutions: secular schools and national systems of education. Thus, I want my approach to the meaning of aesthetics to be clearly demarcated: I merely attempt to define the place of literature in modern institutions of education; a place I consider, however, of great importance to understand the ways both “literature” and “education” informed and defined each other during the last decades

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<sup>40</sup> J. Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes From the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (London: Verso Books, 2013).

of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century and the first of the 20<sup>th</sup> – not in full harmony but, to the contrary, in constant conflicts.

This is all the more evident in Spanish America. As it is well known, since the emergence of modern Spanish American nation-states, artists and intellectuals have been crucial in the development of public systems of education.<sup>41</sup> Thus, in Spanish America aesthetic humanism posed a new relation (sometimes real, sometimes only wished for) between culture and the State. The relation was first thoroughly developed by José Enrique Rodó in his influential *Ariel* (1900), which, as Julio Ramos points out, had great impact on the educational systems of many Spanish American nations.<sup>42</sup> *Ariel*, to be sure, was informed by all of Rodó's *maestros*, a long and well-established tradition of Spanish American pedagogues, from Sarmiento to Martí. But if we actually perceive this tradition, it is because Rodó's *Ariel* articulated it in such a way that it would determine the next three decades of Spanish American intellectual life – Rodó not only synthesized the pedagogic tradition from the past but became the center for a new generation of *maestros*. Roberto González Echeverría, who has best investigated the figure of the *maestro* in Spanish American cultural life, reads *Ariel* as the instauration of specific kind of cultural authority: the “voice of the master” as the “possessors and transmitter of knowledge about culture.”<sup>43</sup> For González Echeverría, this form of paternal authority involved a dialectic “conflict between truth as a sharing of spirit and as ideological imposition.”<sup>44</sup> In this sense, it is a form of symbolic violence: “The

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<sup>41</sup> See the thorough *Historia de los intelectuales en América Latina I: La ciudad letrada, de la conquista al modernismo*, ed. Jorge Myers (Buenos Aires: Katz Editores, 2010) and *Historia de los intelectuales en América Latina II: Los avatares de la ciudad letrada en el siglo XX*, ed. Carlos Altamirano (Buenos Aires: Katz Editores, 2010), both volumes coordinated by Carlos Altamirano. See also José Luis Romero's seminal *Latinoamérica: las ciudades y las ideas* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1976).

<sup>42</sup> Ramos, *Desencuentros*, note to page 62.

<sup>43</sup> Roberto González Echeverría, “The Case of the Speaking Statue: *Ariel* and the Magisterial Rhetoric of the Latin American essay,” in *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 10.

<sup>44</sup> González Echeverría, 26

rhetorical power to sustain the magisterial voice consists in doing violence to an implied other onto whom one's words are to be cut."<sup>45</sup> I will dissent from this last conclusion (a conclusion that is actually the premise of Pierre Bourdieu's and Jean-Claude Passeron's *La reproduction. éléments pour une théorie du système d'enseignement*) by considering the "voice of the master" as a form of seduction, rather than mere symbolic violence.

*Aesthetic Matters'* first chapter – "The Concert of Collective Existence: Aesthetic Education in José Enrique Rodó's *Ariel*" – offers a reading of Rodó's *Ariel* as a reaction against the logic of the market, what Rama defined as that "exasperación del yo" postulated by Rubén Darío's early poetry. I do not wish, however, to consider Rodó's works, neither *Ariel* nor his essay on Darío's poetry, a sort of chastisement of Darío's most transgressive aspects. Through Darío's early poetry, Rodó theorized (in a very contemporary sense) a way of writing poetry determined by the logic of the market – Rodó actually anticipated Ángel Rama's argument on Darío. And yet, Rodó knew there was no way to settle the dispute but through literary language itself – *Ariel* was both his poetic and pragmatic answer. Against the logic of the market – novelty and subjectivation, in Rama's terms – *Ariel* affirmed an organic relation between "literature" and national institutions of education. Rather than obeying the logic of the commodity-market, literary language should pursue the high principles of the school, that is, the master's voice, which made subjects by harmonizing each student's desire. So, aesthetic education was, from Rodó onwards, an education of desire. By affirming the principles of the school, Rodó opposed Darío's efforts to professionalize literature as a device to generate unique objects. The first chapter will argue that *Ariel* embodied, in its very use of language, the tensions between the specialization of the market and national schools' *pedagogic* function. To Darío's "acritic" poetry, Rodó opposed the

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<sup>45</sup> González Echeverría, 27

production of a “general” literary language, “el habla común” that, through its *communicability*, engendered “el espíritu de la raza.”

Synthetic subjects, thus, were produced through this *common* literary tongue. For Rodó, however, the aesthetic subject did not mystically emerge from the *common* tongue. The ultimate foundation of Rodó’s aesthetic subject was not a common literary language, but what was actually required for its production and consumption: leisure time, “ocio noble.” Ultimately, Rodó’s aesthetic subject depended on the possession of, and investment in, a specific kind of time capital – leisure. As Rodó also theorized, leisure was the result of a social relation between two distinct, but interrelated, modes of national (and supra-national) production: the “utilitarian” and the “spiritual.” Thus, *Ariel* conceptualized the relations of what Pierre Bourdieu would later categorize as the fields of economic and cultural production – each distinct yet dependent on its dialectical other.<sup>46</sup>

My reading of *Ariel* poses less a textual origin for *arielismo* than a general conceptual framework: the relations between literary language and subject making; the distinction between literature as either a general or a specialized activity; the relations between orality, writing and communication; the links between distinct kind of ‘goods’ (the spiritual and the positive); and the distinction between the different kinds of time capital needed to produce and consume them: worktime and leisure-time. Within this general framework, which admitted novelty and variation, appropriations of *Ariel* were multifarious and manifold – its capability to adapt was one of the reasons of its success.

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<sup>46</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed,” “The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods” and “The Market of Symbolic Goods,” all collected in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

*Aesthetic Matters*, thus, focuses on the literary and institutional works of two Mexican *arielistas*: Alfonso Reyes and José Vasconcelos. Both were substantially formed by their close contact with Dominican intellectual Pedro Henríquez Ureña, the St. Paul of Rodó's aesthetic "good news." I admit that an examination of Henríquez Ureña's critical imagination, his adventures throughout the Americas, the time he spent in Mexico, as well as his personal and written concurrence with Reyes and Vasconcelos, is painfully missing from the dissertation. It remains work to be done – drawing the figure of the teacher's teacher, the foreign yet familiar personage who instructed those who would later ambition to instruct Mexico and Spanish America. *Mea culpa*, an insufficiency I will certainly address in the future.

The second chapter – "Aesthetic Matters: Humanism, Literary Language and the Professionalization of Culture in Alfonso Reyes's *Cuestiones estéticas*" – examines *Cuestiones Estéticas* (1911), Alfonso Reyes's youthful collection of critical prose. The first edition of *Ariel* that was published in Mexico resulted precisely from young Reyes's initiative (at Henríquez Ureña's suggestions) and thanks to the intervention of Alfonso's father, General Bernardo Reyes, Governor of prosperous Nuevo León. Thus, Prospero's lecture was published in 1906 by the northern state's publishing house. *Cuestiones estéticas*, published in Paris five years later by Paul Ollendorf's *Sociedad de Ediciones Literarias y Artísticas*, when Reyes was still a young law student, reformulated many of the fundamentals of *arielismo*. It was an incredibly ambitious effort, both to deepen *Ariel's* fundamental concerns and to get distance from them. The distance came from Reyes's minute knowledge of poetic praxis. In modernity – from Schiller to Baudelaire or to Rubén Darío or to T.S. Eliot or to Alfonso Reyes and Jorge Cuesta – the meaning of poetry and that of criticism coincided. But, within the paradigm of *Ariel's* aesthetic humanism, formulated by Rodó and preached throughout the Americas by Henríquez Ureña, the only true poet was Alfonso

Reyes - the figure most lovingly concerned with the implications of poetics in national institutions of education.

Thus, *Cuestiones estéticas* constitutes a fundamental document – written from the point of view of a poet – that thoroughly explored distinctions and identifications between “school language” and “literary language” during the later years of Porfirian Mexico (1876-1911). These were also the years Reyes spent at the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, an experience that thoroughly informed *Cuestiones estéticas*. In order to critically engage the relations between school and literary languages (and thus their link to the making of aesthetic subjects), Reyes made use of the Platonic and humanist dialogue. In *Cuestiones estéticas* central piece, “Tres diálogos,” Prospero’s monologue is reflexively split into a dialogue between two young students, Castro and Valdés. The second chapter argues that the humanist dialogue between Castro and Valdés enacts a linguistic drama (for desire lies at its center), in which scholastic language is overcome through the literary creation of a “general” language. For the young Reyes, the quality of being “general” (both before and beyond specialization) defined the literary. Furthermore, the chapter shows that Reyes conceived the material conditions for the overcoming of specialized languages through an image of domestic harmony. That is, he advanced not only the instauration of a *sui generis* patriarchal authority, which instituted a sharp distinction between poetry as *surplus* and poetry as *work*, but he also imagined the possibility of a poetic *surplus* sustained on the harmonious relations between domestic labor and the poetic visions achieved inside the master’s private study-room. This image constituted the antithesis of the school as a site of language creation.

It is a commonplace in Mexican literary criticism to define Alfonso Reyes against José Vasconcelos, José Vasconcelos against Alfonso Reyes. The figures of the comparison are many and range from the mythological to the sociological: Apollo vs Dionisius, the Poet vs the



Philosopher, the Humanist vs the Catholic, the Scholar vs the Politician.<sup>47</sup> In their later years, Vasconcelos and Reyes cultivated the distance between their figures, although they were symbolically reconciled in the obituary Reyes wrote after Vasconcelos's passing in 1955, and shortly before passing away himself that same year. Here, however, I will distinguish between Vasconcelos and Reyes only in so far as they gave different answers (and some not that different) to the same set of questions I have grouped under the heading of *arielismo*. To be sure, both figures embodied a particular relation between intellectuals and the State, mediated by national institutions of education. And this position crucially influenced their definitions of literature and literary language.

Whereas Reyes explored the relations between school and literary languages, and their link to subject making, by dialogically doubling Prospero's monologue, Vasconcelos explored these same issues by personal introversion. The third chapter – “The Mexican Wasteland: Education, Work and Aesthetics in José Vasconcelos's *Ulises Criollo*” – will argue that, through the narration of his own life, Vasconcelos pondered over the material and institutional conditions of aesthetic education. Thus, the chapter focuses on the first volume of Vasconcelos's memoirs, which constitutes, as it were, Vasconcelos's “bildungsroman” –narrating his early school years in Eagle Pass, Texas, his years at *institutos de provincia*, before arriving at the Nacional Preparatoria, as well as his University experience, studying Law, but wishing to become a philosopher, and his time as a private and very successful lawyer, before becoming involved with Madero's movement. As I will show, through this itinerary Vasconcelos showed that the making of aesthetic subjects

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<sup>47</sup> See, for example Christopher Domínguez Michael's *Tiros en el concierto* (Mexico City: Era, 1997); Susana Quintanilla's “Dionisio en México o cómo leyeron nuestros clásicos a los clásicos griegos,” *Historia Mexicana* 51, no. 3 (January 2002): 619-663; Sergio Ugalde Quintana, “Alfonso Reyes lee a Nietzsche: cultura clásica y ethos agonista,” *Nueva revista de filología hispánica* 67, no. 1(November 2018): 131-153.

was a necessity imposed by the struggle for cultural prestige against the United States – a struggle he knew firsthand from his school years at Eagle Pass.

I do not, however, read the memoirs as the successful and transparent expression of José Vasconcelos as an aesthetic subject. Quite the contrary: what *Ulises Criollo* registered in its very writing (and Vasconcelos was quite aware of this) was his yearning to achieve such “universality” – a yearning that was many times hindered not only by historical and social circumstance, but also by literary language itself. Thus, I show that Vasconcelos’s narration was as much about the aesthetic subject as about the concrete ways in which such a subject was “wasted” or “blocked” at educational institutions. And yet, it is precisely as a yearning’s written traces that Vasconcelos’s memoirs allow us to explore to what extent for him aesthetic education was crucially an education of *eros*. For Vasconcelos, literature had the power to produce aesthetic subjects, not only because it functioned as a *meta-specialty* (a discursive space from where specialization could be critiqued, as Julio Ramos argued), but because in literature knowledge and *eros* coexisted. That is, only literature could provide the kind of total satiation demanded by the subject’s desire. Hence, the aesthetic was fundamentally an erotic experience, in which object and subject were fully interpenetrated, an experience more akin to Vasconcelos’s intercourse with women than with other forms of knowledge. It was this becoming *one* with the object of desire that engendered the aesthetic subject through literature.

Finally, *Aesthetic Matters* explores the death (or at least the agony) of *arielismo*: the moment when literature producers detached themselves from national institutions of education. True, Vasconcelos’s memoirs already displayed bitter irony towards *arielismo* – in the last volume he called Rodó “un provinciano de genio.” But Vasconcelos wrote with the disappointment of a believer, who found that not all promises were fulfilled. When he wrote his memoirs, he was still

very much under the shadow of *arielismo* – but now old and bitter. The true detachment of literature production from its pedagogic function was by a younger generation, the so-called *Contemporáneos* (for their links to the literary journal *Contemporáneos*). The young group of poets and critics, including Xavier Villaurrutia, José Gorostiza, Salvador Novo, Bernardo Ortíz de Montellano, Jorge Cuesta and Gilberto Owen, liberated poetry and literary prose from the humanistic task of making synthetic subjects. For them, nostalgia for the subject was gone: they were decidedly modern, in the sense that they were unashamedly specialists.

Thus, the fourth and final chapter – “The Object and its Shadow: Science, Poetry and Eros in the critical works of Jorge Cuesta” – introduces a unique reading of Jorge Cuesta’s writings on art (the art of his friends, many of the times) as the critical point to explore *Contemporáneos*’ rebuff of poetry’s humanist function. Cuesta was “la inteligencia crítica más aguda y trascendente de ese discutido ‘grupo sin grupo’ [*Contemporáneos*],” as Luis Cardoza y Aragón famously proclaimed.<sup>48</sup> Thus, I will argue that, for Cuesta, rejecting poetry’s humanist function implied separating any form of subjectivity from the poetic object. Thus, *Contemporáneos*’ specialized poetic praxis represented not the continuation (as Mexican literary history is prone to state), but a radical break with its humanist predecessors. For Rodó and his followers, the literary text itself constituted a synthetic subjectivity constructed through the master’s voice, which, thus, made the subject it sought – *Ariel* was constructed in the form of a lecture; Reyes’ *Cuestiones estéticas* was structured as a humanist dialogue; Vasconcelos wrote, or tried to write, himself. Against this, Cuesta conceived of specialization as a sacrificial act by which poetry gave up its claims of “synthesis.” But, through the sacrifice, poetry gained its unique *object*. Thus, poetry and critique

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<sup>48</sup> Luis Cardoza y Aragón, *Apolo y Coatlicue: ensayos mexicanos de espina y flor* (Mexico City: La Serpiente emplumada, 1944), 145.

resembled the experimental sciences, which gave up the totality of experience in order to produce an analytical object, which worked as the foundation of each specific science. For Cuesta, hence, by throwing out its humanist function, poetry took its place not within a subjective synthesis and totality, but alongside other forms of specialized knowledge.

Ultimately, however, I will argue that Cuesta saw the literature of his generation as a *truncated* specialization. Indeed, even if the *Contemporáneos'* poetry rejected magisterial authority, it was also a fact that most of them still depended on the Ministry of Education to make a living. Many of them had, in their early youth, participated in Vasconcelos's cultural campaigns. But, unlike the humanist generation that preceded them, the majority of them never sought to become great public men – the exception, of course, was Jaime Torres Bodet, who became Minister of Education and even UNESCO's general director. Most of them were modest bureaucrats, happy to cash in and go write poetry about mirrors, windows, sounds at night, glasses, reflections. The constant polemic that surrounded *Contemporáneos* during the 1920's and 1930's was the result of this tension between their bureaucratic positions and their rejection of any pedagogic dimension in their writings. Their enemies accused the Minister of Education of being a kind of illegitimate *mecenas*, financing the private poetry of these individuals rather than the public poetry of other artistic groups. And yet, I will argue that Cuesta's critical writings registered *Contemporáneos'* very conditions of literary production – their rejection of poetry's humanist function and their simultaneous dependence on different forms of *mecenazgo*. Thus, Cuesta conceived the *Contemporáneos'* poetry as “the pure zeal of negation:” it rejected poetry's pedagogic function, but it could go no further, for the poetic object was but the void or the absence between itself and the subject, a void that, nevertheless, represented for Cuesta the negative, fascinating space of desire and adventure.

In a way, *Aesthetic Matters* concludes in a milieu not that different from the one it started with. Aesthetic humanism was fully articulated in Spanish America by Rodó's *Ariel* as a critique and as an alternative to the specialized poetry of Darío's *Prosas profanas*. And aesthetic humanism ended, at least in Mexico, with the *Contemporáneos*' specialized poetry, which aimed to produce analytical objects rather than synthetic subjects. But this did not represent its final death. Prospero's concerns reappear, for example, in José Revueltas' critique of capitalist fragmentation, in his theories on specialization at the University, and in his concern with the emergence of 'political' subjects. It also reappeared, for example, in the works of Octavio Paz, where the 'poetic' moment was described as the reconciliation of the subject's opposite passions. Thus, if the story I tell concludes at a similar place to its point of departure, it is because I believe this is an ongoing story, which is anything but linear. In fact, it is made of deviations, returns, analogies, distinctions, similitudes and complications. I hold this certitude: the tensions here explored – between literature as a general or a specialized praxis, its place between the market and the schools (think of the number of Spanish American writers working today at US literature departments), and its different functions as producer of subjects *or* objects – still circumscribe contemporary literature and criticism.

Furthermore, the humanist ideals embedded in the tradition traceable to *Ariel* have endured in the scholarly life of Spanish America. Today, right at this moment, the Mexican government speaks again of "humanist" education, seeking to debunk the influence of neoliberalism in children and young students. "Humanism," it is believed, would counterbalance individualism, ambition and the *ethos* of competition; humanism is supposed to create subjects content with their role in the social division of labor, for, as long as the economic and political systems fosters individual

ambition and competition, the “humanist” subjects are at a great disadvantage in the social struggle. This is what true humanism historically did *not* mean, either in its bourgeois or Marxist formulations. Aesthetic humanism, in its different variations, is still an urgent dilemma for pedagogues, teachers and literary scholars. For it ultimately concerns our own professional praxis, the function we assign to literature and the humanities in education, our very “use value” as “educators,” and the social and interpersonal relations we establish between literature, students and ourselves inside the classroom.

## CHAPTER I. THE CONCERT OF COLLECTIVE EXISTENCE: AESTHETIC EDUCATION

### IN JOSÉ ENRIQUE RODÓ'S *ARIEL*

#### *I. Introducing the Cast*

In his essay “On the Teaching of Modern Literature,” Lionel Trilling pondered over the paradoxes faced by teachers of modern and modernist literature in North American universities. For Trilling, reading Baudelaire, Dostoevsky or Kafka inside the classroom was a scene not without irony: could there be anything more self-contradictory than the “socialization of the anti-social, the acculturation of the anti-cultural, the legitimization of the subversive”? It is not that Trilling was averse to the cultural critique formulated by modern writers – irony springs from the contradiction between the works’ “subversive” qualities and the setting for their institutionally sanctioned transmission. Indeed, as Matei Calinescu noted in a comment on Trilling’s essay, by belonging to a liberal institution of education the literature teacher serves the spirit which “believes in progress, education, perfectibility, etc.; and he serves it even if he does not want to, because the bare fact of lecturing on modernity implies an ‘honorific’ and dignified use of the term ‘modern.’” How then could the teacher *teach* modern literature, when the critique of ‘progress,’ ‘education,’ and ‘perfectibility’ - everything the university stands for - is its very essence?<sup>1</sup>

These paradoxes on literary modernity and its transmission through institutions of higher education would not, I venture, have seemed strange to the Uruguayan literary critic José Enrique Rodó. Indeed, ‘progress,’ ‘education’ and ‘perfectibility’ are words that ring familiar to anyone

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<sup>1</sup> Lionel Trilling, “On the Teaching of Modern Literature,” in *Beyond Culture* (New York: The Viking Press, 1965); Matei Calinescu, “The Idea of Modernity,” in *Fives Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987). The matter was expressed in all of its tragic-comic dimension in a question, from one of Trilling’s students, about Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*: “How could you generalize the idea of the educative value of illness, so that it would be applicable not only to a particular individual, Hans Castorp, but to young people at large?”

acquainted with the writings Rodó produced from the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century to his death in 1917. Rodó's anxiety must have been all the more intense given that these were the years in which a centralized system of education was developed in Uruguay, as in most other countries in the Spanish Americas. His most famous book, *Ariel* (1900), was indeed a crucial intervention in debates regarding the meaning and function of national education.<sup>2</sup>

The *mis-en-scene* is well known: in his domestic study, an old teacher by the name of Próspero gives a farewell lecture to a group of students. They are presided by a statue of Ariel, the spirit of civilization and light in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, just at the moment in which it dissolves into thin air. In the lecture, divided in six parts and bracketed by a brief prologue and epilogue, Próspero formulates a program of individual and collective 'perfectibility' through the transformative power of literature and the fine arts – a program of aesthetic education. In doing so, he sketched a complex ideological panorama that explored the relations between 'high' culture and the country's rapidly expanding liberal economy, as well as the necessity to produce a collective identity strong enough to absorb mass European migration *and* face the imperial threat of the United States.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In Uruguay, reform of public education was carried out by an admirer of Sarmiento, José Pedro Varela (1845-1879). As Director of Public Instruction during the dictatorship of coronel Lorenzo Latorre (1844-1916), Varela pushed a public curriculum which assigned the most school time to experiential knowledge of common-life objects (20%) and the least to the teaching of religion (4%). For Varela, the aim of public education was clear: "Si el pueblo es embrutecido e ignorante, el trabajo será pobre, rutinario y estéril; si el pueblo es inteligente e instruido, el trabajo será activo, ingenioso y creador. La cuestión es de vida o muerte para la gran industria, la agricultura y el comercio, para la riqueza en fin."<sup>2</sup> Projects of popular education were intricately linked with the development of a working force, and thus with the destiny of the nation itself. It is worth remarking that as a young man, Rodó went to school at the Escuela y Liceo Elbio Fernández, a secular institution founded by the "Sociedad de Amigos de la Educación Popular" of which Varela was first secretary and then president. See Arturo Ardao, *La filosofía en el Uruguay en el siglo XXI* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1956) and *Espiritualismo y positivismo en el Uruguay* (Montevideo: Universidad de la República, Departamento de Publicaciones, 1969); Juan Antonio Odone, *La universidad uruguaya del militarismo a la crisis* (Montevideo: Universidad de la República, Departamento de Publicaciones, 1971); Jorge Bralich, *José Pedro Varela: sociedad burguesa y reforma educacional* (Montevideo: Ediciones del Nuevo Mundo, 1989) and *Una historia de la educación en el Uruguay* (Montevideo: Fundación de Cultura Universitaria, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> For a summary view on the influence of Shakespeare's play in Spanish America, see Gordon Brotherson, "Arielismo and anthropophagy: The *Tempest* in Latin America," in *The Tempest and its travels*, ed. Peter Hulme and William



This particular pedagogic program determined Rodó's attitude towards (and position *in*) the hegemonic poetic movement of his time, Spanish American *modernismo*. Indeed, the agonistic pairing of emblematic *modernista* poet Ruben Darío and Rodó is one of the very foundations of *modernismo* as a critical discourse and as an object of academic study.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, this pairing was first made by Rodó himself. In 1899, one year after the end of the Spanish American war and one before the publication of *Ariel*, Rodó published a widely read and commented critical essay on Darío's *Prosas profanas* (1896). Its first sentence is well known: "No es el poeta de América." There, Rodó realized a critique of Darío's poems that nonetheless, in Rodó's own words, "no es para señalar [...] una condición de inferioridad literaria," but to define the poet's personality and his corresponding place in Spanish American poetry.<sup>5</sup>

In his discussion of Darío and Rodó, Gerard Aching defined in contemporary deconstructive language the topos of *modernista* 'decadence' as a promiscuous proliferation of poetic signs that suppress the poem's referent – the *modernista* poem is a place of excess where the materiality of language threatens to impair its ideological content and the emotional impact

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Sherman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000). For two views that emphasize Ernest Renan's *Caliban* over Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, see Arturo Ardao, "Del Calibán de Renan al Calibán de Rodó," in *Estudios latinoamericanos de historia de las ideas* (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1978) and Gerard Aching's chapter "Sculpting Spanish America: Rodó's *Ariel*," in *The Politics of Spanish-American Modernismo: By Exquisite Design* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> For comparisons between Darío and Rodó, Max Henríquez Ureña, *Rodó y Rubén Darío* (Havana: Sociedad editorial Cuba contemporánea, 1918); Osvaldo Crispo Acosta, *Rubén Darío y José Enrique Rodó* (Montevideo: Agencia General de Librería y Publicaciones, 1924); Eduardo Crema, "Rodó y Rubén Darío," in *Estudios sobre Rubén Darío*, ed. Ernesto Mejía Sánchez (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1968); Emir Rodríguez Monegal, "La utopía modernista: el mito del nuevo y del viejo mundo en Darío y Rodó," *Revista Iberoamericana* 46, no. 112-113 (July 1980); Sylvia Molloy, "Ser y decir en Darío: el poema liminar de Cantos de vida y esperanza," *Texto Crítico* 639, no. 38 (January 1988): 30-42, and "Deseo e ideología a fines del siglo XIX," in *Poses de fin de siglo: desbordes del género en la modernidad* (Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia Editoria, 2012); Alfonso García Morales, "Clarín y Rodó frente a la poesía modernista," in *Literatura y pensamiento hispánico de fin de siglo: Clarín y Rodó* (Sevilla: Secretariado de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Sevilla, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> See José Enrique Rodó, "Ruben Darío," in *Ariel*, ed. Raimundo Lazo (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 2005), 137.

(influence) it must bear on its reader.<sup>6</sup> When confronting this kind of poetry, the literary critic and the teacher of literature are ultimately faced by a sensuous residue that refuses to be translated into stable ideological content. Indeed, what Rodó criticized about Darío was his unwillingness to “hacer escuela.”

Su poesía llega al oído de los más como los cantos de un rito no entendido [/] el personalismo nada expansivo de su poesía, su manifiesta aversión a las ideas e instituciones circunstantes [/] Tal inclinación, entre epicúrea y platónica, a lo Renacimiento Florentino, no sería encomiable como modelo de una escuela, pero es perfectamente tolerable como signo de una elegida individualidad...<sup>7</sup>

A few years earlier, Spanish novelist and critic Juan Valera (who had an extremely brief stint as Minister of Public Instruction in the 1872) had written about Darío’s *Azul* (1888): “Si me preguntase qué enseña su libro de usted y de qué trata, respondería yo sin vacilar: no enseña nada, y trata de nada y de todo.”<sup>8</sup>

In this sense, *Ariel* has been read by many critics as a kind of ideological chastisement of Spanish American *modernismo*.<sup>9</sup> The reason behind this chastisement is conventionally located in 1898 - the end of the Spanish-Cuban war, the material and symbolic downfall of the Spanish Empire and the definite emergence of the United States as the new imperial power of the continent. In this urgent situation, so the narrative goes, the linguistic excesses of *modernismo* had to be reined in, not completely suppressed but harnessed to a stronger, less ambiguous ideological claim. Poetic excess was reduced to the rule of sense, and the ultimate horizon of sense became one or another form of grand identity, such as *Hispanism* or *Latin Americanism*. At the end of his essay

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<sup>6</sup> Aching, “Sculpting Spanish America,” 42. For a thorough discussion on Spanish American *decadentismo*, the notion of *latinidad* and Rodó’s educational projects, see Michela Coletta, *Decadent Modernity: Civilization and Latinidad in Spanish America, 1880-1920* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Rodó, “Ruben Darío,” 138-142.

<sup>8</sup> Darío included Valera’s letter at the beginning of *Azul*’s second edition. See Darío, *Azul; Cantos de vida y esperanza* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Silvia Molloy calls it a “manual de salud continental” and “helenismo terapéutico.”

on Darío, Rodó wished the poet would apply his undeniable poetic talents to the “servicio de una idea” and that his poetry would contribute to the “florecer del espíritu en el habla común, que es el arca santa de la raza.”

And yet, as Arcadio Díaz-Quiñones has written, the figuration of 1898 as a historic crossroad or turning point can also obscure the concrete histories and problems that many nations in Spanish America faced since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> In this chapter, rather than reading Rodó’s *Ariel* (and its position in Spanish American *modernismo*) in the dramatic terms of an identity crisis or the epic terms of a clash of empires, I wish to consider the text in relation to a strand of that complex history: the organization of national (liberal and positivistic) institutions of education, with a curriculum focused on science and professionalization, during the second half the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. As Ángel Rama noticed, Darío himself prefigured the tension between the excessive language of his *modernismo* and the educated, civilized subject produced by the school: “*Celui-qui-ne-comprend-pas* es entre nosotros profesor, académico correspondiente de la Real Academia Española, periodista, abogado, poeta, *rastaquoère*.”<sup>11</sup> Later on, Darío declared a radical antipedagogic will:

Porque proclamando, como proclamo, una estética acrática, la imposición de un modelo o de un código implicaría una contradicción [/] Yo no tengo literatura ‘mía’ – como lo ha manifestado una magistral autoridad -, para marcar el rumbo de los demás; quien siga servilmente mis huellas perderá su tesoro personal, y, paje o esclavo, no podrá ocultar sello o librea. Wagner, a Augusta Holmes, su discípula, dijo un día: ‘lo primero, no imitar a nadie, y sobre todo, a mí.’<sup>12</sup>

In the antithesis between an “acritic aesthetics” and “magisterial authority,” Darío registered a contradiction between the cultural value of *modern* poetry as radical singularity and the pedagogic

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<sup>10</sup> Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, *Sobre los principios: los intelectuales caribeños y la tradición* (Bernal, Argentina: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes Editorial, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Rubén Darío, “Palabras liminares,” in *Prosas profanas* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> Darío, “Palabras liminares,” 12.

task of national schools at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century – not merely to reproduce an existing social type but to create it.<sup>13</sup> This contradiction, it seems to me, is the productive nucleus of Rodó’s prose in *Ariel*.

However, the relationship between modernist poetry and institutions of state funded education was not merely negative. Is it not the purpose of ‘public’ education, indeed the purpose and sole lack of legitimation of the State itself, as Próspero declares in the fourth part of his discourse, to *give shape* to the formless *mass* – that is, to function as an aesthetic organ of distinction and development? Thus, while the need for social reproduction through schools established a rhetorical limit for modernist poetry in *Ariel*, schools themselves were determined by an aesthetic principle and carried out an aesthetic function. In Próspero’s lecture, the modernist principle of radical poetic singularity exists in dialectical relation to the possibility of its social reproduction, each element informing the other. That’s why Rodó prompts Darío to work towards the “florecer del espíritu en el habla común, que es el arca santa de la raza -” poetic innovation and originality should not produce a *private* language, but rather “el habla común.” Próspero’s notion of *race* – as many of his disciples, including Pedro Henríquez Ureña, Alfonso Reyes and Gabriel Mistral recognized – was not determined by pseudo-scientific fictions. It consisted rather in the *possibility of cultural communication* - not the abstract sharing of a language (which is in itself meaningless) but the determined production of a distinctly Spanish American literary praxis. In *Ariel*, the concept of a Hispanic *race* refers always to the actual class of intellectuals who produce

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<sup>13</sup> See Angel Rama’s discussion on the “death” of poetic schools and Darío’s poetry as the result of the values – novelty and originality – imposed by the liberal market in *Ruben Darío y el modernismo* (Caracas: Alfadil Ediciones, 1985).

such a concept, as Gerard Aching also notices.<sup>14</sup> The Hispanic *race* is not ciphered on the subject's body but is rather the product of institutionally reproduced forms of writing – “el habla común.”<sup>15</sup>

Given that *Ariel's* program of ‘aesthetic’ education was aimed at the production of a particular subject, it is no wonder that stories, fables and fantastical characters abound in Prospero's lecture.<sup>16</sup> My reading focuses on a series of individual and collective characters: “youth,” the mutilated man, the hospitable king and the philosophical slave, the aristocratic genius and the anonymous worker. Attention will be paid not only to the characters themselves, but to their particular textual positions – some of them playing their roles in the background, others as protagonists of their own stories, and others simply as rhetorical devices such as metaphors and analogies. In the first section, I will examine the ways Prospero's metaphorically constructs his notion of “youth,” a notion he seeks to realize in his own students. In the second section, I will examine the reverse of Prospero's desire for an aesthetic subject: the mutilated man, the subject reduced to the professional or the specialist. In the third section I will revisit Próspero's famous story of the hospitable king, in order to distinguish between the kinds of capital necessary for his humanist utopia to take place. In the fourth section, I analyze Prospero's theory on the “equivalence of forces,” a particular relation between what he calls positive goods and spiritual goods. Finally, I will consider *Ariel's* immediate influence in Spanish American education and attempt to provide a working definition for *arielismo*.

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<sup>14</sup> Aching, “Sculpting Spanish America,” 112.

<sup>15</sup> In his introduction to a recent edition of *Ariel*, Pablo Rocca shrewdly notes that that Próspero's lecture tries to “apartarse de cualquier contaminación dialectal para que su obra ingrese en distintos puntos donde se hable y escriba en español, donde la idea de una lengua estándar aún es resistido y lo será por varias décadas más, en momentos en que subía de temperatura la ya vieja polémica sobre la lengua, sobre todo en Argentina.” See “Prólogo,” in *Ariel*, ed. Pablo Rocca (Sevilla: Editorial Renacimiento, 2019), 44.

<sup>16</sup> In the introduction to his complete edition of Rodó works, Rodríguez Monegal comments on *Ariel's* compositional technique as “sucesivamente expositiva y parabólica (la novia enajenada, el rey hospitalitario, el esclavo filósofo).” See *Obras completas*, ed. Emir Rodríguez Monegal (Madrid: Aguilar, 1957), 195.

## *II. Forms of Capital: Youth (Symbolic foundations of collective subject)*

Próspero's lecture begins by addressing the theme of "youth." Before embarking on any other subject, Prospero speaks to his students about themselves – not themselves as individuals, but as a collective entity. For there is indeed a difference between the young male students Prospero is lecturing and what he means by "youth." For Próspero, "youth" implied a particular "virtue" (*prenda*) of an individual or collective spirit. In this sense, indeed, the young may grow to be "young"! But by addressing his students about "youth," Prospero is actually trying to accomplish this very transformation - the qualitative leap of a generic group of young individuals (youth) into a unified historical agent, a generation ("youth"). This leap is described by Prospero as a "becoming conscious" (*sed conscientes*).<sup>17</sup>

As I will show, *Ariel's* first section is but a performance of this operation: to make the students *become conscious* of themselves as "youth." What this meant, I will argue, is that that students became conscious of themselves as both a capital to be invested and the subject in charge of investing it wisely or wastefully.<sup>18</sup> Of course, the different forms of capital that exist in modern economies have been defined at length by Pierre Bourdieu. In "The Forms of Capital," Bourdieu offers a general definition of capital as "accumulated labor," a definition that will be important in another section of this chapter. Then, the French sociologist distinguished between three types of capital: economic, cultural, and social; and three distinct kinds of cultural capital: embodied (habits

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<sup>17</sup> For a lively engagement with Rodó's notion of "youth," see Rafael Rojas, "El lenguaje de la juventud: En diálogo con *Ariel*, de José Enrique Rodó," *Nueva Sociedad*, no. 238 (March 2012): 28-40.

<sup>18</sup> In "Rodó's *Ariel* or Youth as Humano Tesoro," Jaime Concha points out that Rodó's definition of "youth" was very much influenced by Ernest Renan's: "Renan maintained that youth's 'human treasure' was a priceless privilege that one had to carefully invest in order to enjoy a comfortable return later on in life." Concha is interested in Rodó's image of "youth" as it poses the question of a specific social class, middle-class intellectuals, and its hope of "managing" the future: he explores the literary relations between "youth" and notions such as "ideal," "future," and "action." See "Rodó's *Ariel* or Youth as Humano Tesoro," in *Bridging the Atlantic: Toward a Reassessment of Iberian and Latin American Cultural Ties*, ed. Marina Pérez de Mendiola (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996).

of body and thought), objectified (possession and understanding of cultural goods, such as paintings and old books), and institutionalized (school certifications, learned competencies).<sup>19</sup> Here, I wish to examine the kind of cultural capital represented by youth as established by Próspero himself. In what follows, then, let us examine the next proposition: in the first section of his lecture, *Prospero speaks to youth about “youth.”*

*Prospero speaks to youth about “youth.”* Three metaphors express with precision the notion of youth as a kind of capital: “land” (*terreno*), “force” and “treasure.” In the case of land, Prospero says “[p]ienso también que el espíritu de la juventud es un terreno generoso donde la simiente de una palabra oportuna suele rendir, en corto tiempo, los frutos de una inmortal vegetación.”<sup>20</sup> Here, the “land” metaphor implies a relation between a kind of passive element (generous but still in need of seed), a linguistic agent (“palabra oportuna”) and the production of a particular benefit or good: immortal vegetation. As a form of landed capital, it implied both the possibility of bareness and of future splendor, an alternative contingent on sowing the correct linguistic seed. Indeed, the Spanish *terreno* not only connotes any piece of land, but also one that is meant for investing and developing.

But youth as capital is not only described by Prospero through the metaphor of “land.” Not much later, he again says to his students: “La juventud que vivís es una fuerza de cuya aplicación sois los obreros y un tesoro de cuya inversión sois los responsables.”<sup>21</sup> Metaphorically, we have

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<sup>19</sup> See Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J.G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986). This is the most succinct, structured and generously pedagogical formulation of Bourdieu’s different forms of capital I have been able to find. For other important texts, see “The Market of Symbolic Goods,” (originally published as “Le marché des biens symboliques” in 1971); “The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods” (originally published as “La production de la croyance: contribution à une économie des biens symboliques” in 1977); and “The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed” (originally published in 1983). All of these of them can be found in Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press).

<sup>20</sup> José Enrique Rodó, *Ariel*, ed. Belén Castro (Madrid: Cátedra, 2000), 141. All quotes from this edition.

<sup>21</sup> Rodó, *Ariel*, 142.

moved from the country to the city. Now, youth owns itself as “labor power” and as “treasure,” the means to *invest*. It is an odd pairing: youth is both capitalist and worker, as Jaime Concha has pointed out.<sup>22</sup> But it could be said that, together, the three metaphors produce, or at least suggest, the effect of an integral process: youth is the symbolical owner of the land, the labor power, and the means of production. In the production of itself, it seems to have everything it needs. Nevertheless –

*Prospero speaks to youth about “youth.”* Like the “landed” metaphor implied, an external agent was necessary for youth to acquire consciousness of itself as a particular historical agent (for it to go from “land,” “force” and “treasure” to the qualitative category of “youth”). It is Prospero’s function to call forth this consciousness unto being: in this first section, his voice is described as “rayo de luz,” “toque del pincel” and “palabra suave,” what Gonzalez Echeverría has grouped as metaphors of “light” in his seminal study of *Ariel’s* “magisterial rethoric.”<sup>23</sup> This magisterial voice functions as a wakeup call: “...debéis empezar por reconocer un primer objeto de fe, en vosotros mismo;”<sup>24</sup> “Sed, pues, conscientes poseedores de la fuerza bendita que lleváis dentro de vosotros mismo.”<sup>25</sup> The young students’ recognition of their own “fuerza bendita” is intricately linked with the master’s authority. But, at the same time that the *magisterial* voice reveals its own presence, it also erases it to a certain extent, and this erasure is of vital importance for its success. Soon enough, Prospero proclaims that this notion of youth as a blessed force is not something institutionally produced but belongs to its “natural attributes.”<sup>26</sup> In this sense, Prospero gives us as nature what

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<sup>22</sup> Concha, “Youth as Humano Tesoro,” 114.

<sup>23</sup> Roberto González Echeverría, “The Case of the Speaking Statue: *Ariel* and the Magisterial Rhetoric of the Latin American essay,” in *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin America Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).

<sup>24</sup> Rodó, *Ariel*, 142.

<sup>25</sup> Rodó, 146.

<sup>26</sup> Rodó, 151.



is strictly be the object of education. And, indeed, it may be that what the teacher or the school pass of as “nature” – that is, as that which is given, does not need to be taught, already belongs to the pupil – is actually what is being truly *taught* (being socially reproduced). Magisterial authority is most effective when it erases its own presence and influence.

In its most radical formulation, the active role of the school and of magisterial activity in the “investment” of youth is completely effaced by Prospero:

El deber del Estado consiste en colocar a todos los miembros de la sociedad en indistintas condiciones de tender a su perfeccionamiento. El deber del Estado consiste en predisponer los medios propios para provocar, uniformemente, la revelación de las superioridades humanas, dondequiera que existan. De tal manera, más allá de toda igualdad inicial, toda desigualdad estará justificada, porque será la sanción de las misteriosas elecciones de la Naturaleza o del esfuerzo meritorio de la voluntad.<sup>27</sup>

In this formulation of liberal state funded education – which has by now become a conservative cliché – the school and the state do not produce, but “reveal;” the process of social (re)production is completely mystified, substituted for “nature” and the “will.” The State is not an active presence but a *tabula rasa*.

*Prospero speaks to youth about “youth.”* Youth turns into “youth” by acquiring a consciousness of itself (via the *magisterial* voice) as capital to be invested. This consciousness of itself as a *virtual* collective subject produces is thus twofold: that of being the object and the subject of its own production, investing itself in the production of itself. For Próspero, “enthusiasm” and “hope” are the defining traits of this *virtual* consciousness (the subject as both something to be invested and someone to invest): the first as “la confianza en la eficacia del esfuerzo humano” and the second as “la fe en el porvenir.”<sup>28</sup> The goal of this investment, thus the successful capitalization

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<sup>27</sup> Rodó, 189.

<sup>28</sup> Rodó, 145, 151.

of “youth,” is the production of “la genialidad innovadora.”<sup>29</sup> It is the production of a distinctive, *new* kind of cultural personality that ultimately awards “youth” its distinctive historic place and, correspondingly, a place in the archives: “...el honor de cada generación humana exige que ella se conquiste, por la perseverante actividad de su pensamiento, por el esfuerzo propio, su fe en determinada manifestación del ideal y su puesto en la evolución de las ideas.”<sup>30</sup> Note that, against Darío’s acritic poetry, Rodó interpreted a place in the archives in terms of collectivities or “generations.”

At the same time, there is something very modern in Rodó’s formulation. “Youth” is both agonist and utopian: its status as a collective subject depends on a structural opposition between the *new* and the *old* (its birth as a subject depends on the killing of its father), as well as on the perpetual postponement (Ernest Bloch’s ‘not yet’) of absolute fulfillment.<sup>31</sup> (This realization would necessarily imply the disintegration of ‘youth’ as a historical subject, for the structural opposition would disappear.)

*Why does Prospero speak to youth about “youth”? Or, why is it important for Prospero that “youth” acquire a consciousness of itself as a historical subject? Because, otherwise, it would be wasted (“malogrado”):*

Sed, pues, conscientes poseedores de la fuerza bendita que lleváis dentro de vosotros mismos. No creáis, sin embargo, que ella esté exenta de malograrse y desvanecerse, como un impulso sin objeto, en la realidad. De la Naturaleza es la dádiva del precioso tesoro; pero es de las ideas, que él sea fecundo, o se prodigue vanamente, o fraccionado y disperso en las consciencias personales, no se manifieste en la vida de las sociedades humanas como una fuerza bienhechora.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Rodó, 151.

<sup>30</sup> Rodó, 142.

<sup>31</sup> For a sometimes cynical, yet highly original view on the constitutive dialectic between the old and the new, see Boris Groys, *On the New* (New York: Verso, 2014); for an initial approximation to Bloch’s utopic imagination, see *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*, ed. Jamie Owen Daniel and Tom Moylan (New York: Verso, 1997).

<sup>32</sup> Rodó, *Ariel*, 146.

The consciousness of possession and the fear of loss are thus constituted at the same moment. Again, there is a crucial distinction between “nature” and “education:” while youth as a “blessed force” is a “natural gift,” it is up to “ideas” whether this gift is “fruitful” or “squandered in vain.” To be “squandered in vain” has two meanings in the passage: 1) the failure of “youth” to be realized individually, and 2) the success of individual realization, but in isolation (“es de las ideas, que él sea fecundo, o se prodigue vanamente, o fraccionado y disperso en las consciencias personales, no se manifieste en la vida de las sociedades humanas” [italics mine]). Ultimately, it seems to me that the last sense carries the heavier weight in the sentence: for “youth” to be “squandered in vain” means that it fails to constitute itself collectively and remains an occasional, “fragmented” achievement of “personal” consciousness. *Wastefulness* is synonymous with *dispersion*, *uncommunication*, *isolation* and *fragmentation*. What is ultimately lost, as we have seen, is a place in the archives, the creation of a collective personality with a legitimate place in the history of culture.<sup>33</sup>

*Synthesis.* Youth is both capital (land, force, treasure) and subject (enthusiasm and hope). The capital of youth must be invested in “la genialidad innovadora” and this investment requires a *magisterial* voice. The successful production of “la genialidad innovadora” awards the collective subject a place in the archive (“la historia de las ideas”) and the legitimation of cultural prestige – it transforms youth into “youth” and a “generation.” A “squandered” investment implies the opposite – either individual failure or individual isolation. Either of them resulted in wasted capital,

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<sup>33</sup> In “Mute Inglorious Miltons,” John Guillory qualifies the idea that “the wasting of human potential” is simply a trait of “bourgeois ideology.” For Guillory, “[t]he fact of increased upward mobility is at once the premise of ‘bourgeois ideology’ – that anyone can succeed – and its prime source of social anxiety.” By analyzing Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751), Guillory points towards emerging school systems as the site which “valorizes the process of social mobility as *circulation* per se: What cannot move (up) is waste, and waste is at the same time the necessary *cost* of circulation: every success is at the expense of another’s failure.” See *Cultural Capital* (Chicago: The University Chicago Press, 1993), 95.

the loss of a unique opportunity to be part of cultural history. Thus, *Ariel's* epigraph – *A la juventud de América* – is one of its most effective fictional devices, for the “youth” Prospero truly addresses is waiting to happen at the moment of his discourse.

### *III. Forms of Waste: The Mutilated Man (Faculties, Interest, Communication)*

To waste or squander youth denotes 1) the failure of “youth” to be realized individually, and/or 2) the success of individual realization, but in isolation. In this last sense, it denotes a failure to *communicate* amongst its members and thus to acquire a consciousness of themselves as a collective subject: “¿Será de nuevo la juventud una realidad de la vida colectiva, como lo es de la vida individual?”<sup>34</sup> For Prospero, the fundamental reason for this communication breakdown was the division of labor in modern capitalist societies. (It is worth remarking that, when depicting to his students the dangers of social disintegration through an extreme division of labor, Prospero explicitly states that this danger only afflicts “highly developed” societies, to which his students and himself implicitly belong). Here, however, a crucial distinction applies. Within the wider process of the division of labor, Prospero distinguished between two analogous principles of fragmentation: the “espíritu de especialización” and “la división del trabajo de taller.” The first refers to “[l]a divergencia de las vocaciones personales” and thus to an urban subject educated in the liberal professions – it refers to the division of labor as it manifests itself in higher learning institutions and school curricula, *professionalization*. The second is not explicitly defined, though we might (at least for the moment) surmise that it refers to the division of labor *outside* of the university, that is, to skilled labor.<sup>35</sup> Prospero discusses “the spirit of specialization” in *Ariel's*

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<sup>34</sup> Rodó, *Ariel*, 149.

<sup>35</sup> In *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, Louis Althusser provided a full spectrum of “la división del trabajo de taller,” that is, the division of labor that is determined by the industrial process inside and outside the factory: “...*labour-power*, in each of its atomistic subdivisions, belongs to a large number of individuals who possess no means of production, but only their personal ‘labour-power’, with different degrees of qualifications. These individuals sell the

second section; the relations between “specialization” and the “work-shop” are discussed in its fourth and fifth section.

For Prospero, the “spirit of specialization” that characterized positivist curricula at the end of the century could never produce “youth” at either the individual or the collective level; “specialization” was rather akin to a “mutilation” of the spirit.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the “mutilation” metaphor inaugurates the second part of his lecture:

Pero por encima de los afectos que hayan de vincularlos individualmente a distintas aplicaciones y distintos modos de la vida, debe velar, en lo íntimo de vuestra alma, la conciencia de la unidad fundamental de nuestra naturaleza, que exige que cada individuo humano sea, ante todo y sobre toda otra cosa, un ejemplar no mutilado de la humanidad, en el que ninguna noble facultad del espíritu quede obliterada y ningún alto interés de todos pierda su virtud comunicativa. Antes que las modificaciones de profesión y de cultura esté el cumplimiento del destino común de los seres racionales. Hay una profesión universal, que es la de *hombre*, ha dicho admirablemente Guyau<sup>37</sup>

The imagined site of mutilation – the institution which (re)produced the mutilated man as a subject – was the school, or rather a particular pedagogical praxis based solely on the “spirit of specialization:

Cuando cierto falsísimo y vulgarizado concepto de la educación, que la imagina subordinada exclusivamente al fin utilitario, se empeña en mutilar, por medio de ese utilitarismo y de una especialización prematura, la integridad natural de los espíritus, y anhela proscribir de la enseñanza todo elemento desinteresado e ideal, no repara suficientemente en el peligro de preparar para el porvenir espíritus estrechos, que, incapaces de considerar más que el único aspecto de la realidad con que estén

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use of their labour-power for a set length of time to the owner of the means of production [...] Among these wage-workers, there are different categories of ‘personnel’: common labourers and unskilled workers at the lowest level, then skilled workers, technicians of various levels, supervisors of various kinds, production engineers and various managers.” See *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2014), 31.

<sup>36</sup> For the seminal account of modern fragmentation and its overcoming through culture, see Julio Ramos, “Masa y Latinoamericanismo,” in *Desencuentros de la modernidad* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989). There, Ramos describes the notion of “culture” operative during the last decades of the 19th century and the first of the 20th as “un paradójico dispositivo de adaptación a las exigencias de la modernidad, al requisito de especialización que el capitalismo imponía como modelo a los diferentes tipos de trabajo. *Paradójico* modo de adaptarse, porque si bien estos intelectuales responden a la división del trabajo con una insistente voluntad autonómica, legitiman y representan esa autonomía como condición de su crítica a la especialización.” See *Desencuentros*, 211.

<sup>37</sup> Rodó, *Ariel*, 153.

inmediatamente en contacto, vivirán separados por helados desiertos de los espíritus que, dentro de la misma sociedad, se hayan adherido a otras manifestaciones de la vida.<sup>38</sup>

In both passages, the “mutilation” metaphor signifies a dynamic process: the repression of an individual “faculty” results in the loss of a “common interest” that can no longer be “communicated.” Thus, the “mutilation” metaphor ultimately posed a question of hegemony worthy of the pre-Socratic sophist Gorgias: is it possible to produce a common interest in a social formation marked by a radical division of labor? And if actually produced, can it be successfully communicated amongst the different groups that constitute each formation?

Prospero was by no means alone in his concern over the “spirit of specialization” and the “mutilation” of individual “integrity” at the school. Since the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the emergence and development of national-liberal institutions of higher education (and the growing demand for the liberal professions and technically trained workers, both urban and rural) these questions were unavoidable for philosophers and artists concerned with ‘high’ cultural production, in both Europe and the Americas. The “mutilation” metaphor can already be found, for example, in Friedrich Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794), a text paraphrased by Prospero. To be sure, Schiller’s and Prospero’s circumstances were not the same. And yet, the metaphor implies a general narrative that is worth outlining, in order to understand its full implications in *Ariel*.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Rodó, 154.

<sup>39</sup> The mutilated man was the product of an intricate play between the literary imagination and the consolidation of liberal systems of education during the last three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>: it is both a long-standing, international literary *topos* and a concrete and crucial social agent in the formation and organization of the Mexican cultural and pedagogical field. Important literary texts in its history up to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are: Friedrich Schiller, *Letters for the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794); Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1796); Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar” (1837) and *Representative Men* (1850); Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841); Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*; Ernest Renan, *La réforme intellectuelle et morale de la France* (1871); Friedrich Nietzsche *On the future of our educational institutions* (1872) and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-5); José Martí, “El poeta Walt Whitman” (1887); José Enrique Rodó, *Ariel* (1900); José Ingenieros, *El hombre mediocre* (1913). Georg Lukács provides a historical and theoretical interpretation of this figure in two important essays: “Marx and Engels

The narrative begins by describing a historical situation in which individuals were whole – Prospero speaks of “la integridad natural de los espíritus.” But what does this mean, precisely? It means that, in this prelapsarian situation, individual work took on many forms and thus developed all “faculties” of being – Paradise as the state that precedes the division of labor. In order to emphasize the strength of this narrative beyond the confines of national languages, let us briefly give the word to Ralph Waldo Emerson. In “The American Scholar,” a lecture significantly addressed to an elite group of students at Harvard College in 1837, Emerson began by describing a social formation where each individual was priest, scholar, statesman, producer, and soldier. For Emerson, as for Rodó and virtually every other 19<sup>th</sup>-century intellectual, this situation was once actualized in Classical Greece – Athens was an organic urban body where religion, science, politics, economics and military power were exercised by every individual. In this sense, Classical Greece represented humanity’s “childhood” or “youth.”

However, this state was necessarily followed by a state of “civilization” or “society,” in which greater social complexity demanded the sacrifice of individuals to the material welfare of the whole. While “society” and the division of labor indeed brought extended benefits, they did so at the cost of abandoning individual “integrity” – the harmonic development of every individual’s faculties. Emerson writes: “The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters, - a good finger, a neck, a

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on aesthetics” and “The ideal of the harmonious man in bourgeois aesthetics,” in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1971). As Lukács rightly notes, the point of departure for this subject, historically and theoretically, is the “principle of humanism [...] which the proletariat struggle for freedom inherited from earlier democratic and revolutionary movements and evolved to a higher qualitative level: the demand for a free development of a many-sided, integrated man. Contrarily, the hostility to art and culture inherent in the capitalist mode of production brings a disintegration of man, a disintegration of the concrete totality into abstract specialization.” For a critique, from within Marxism itself, of Lukács defense of classical humanism see Bertolt Brecht, “Against Georg Lukács,” in *Aesthetics and Politics* (New York: Verso, 2007) ed. Fredric Jameson.

stomach, an elbow, but never a man.”<sup>40</sup> Here, when speaking of the state of “society,” Emerson does not mean its *present* situation, but its *necessary* condition: the *polis* as fragmented body. The paradox is clear: either the material welfare of the whole must be sacrificed for individual “integrity,” or the other way around.

Próspero’s answer to the paradox took the form of a subject – an aesthetic subject. In brief, the “mutilation” metaphor in *Ariel* implied the repression of an individual “faculty,” which, in turn, resulted in the loss of a “common interest”: it could be “communicated” no more. Próspero’s aesthetic subject encompassed the redemption of these three elements, thus it was conceived as: 1) the harmony of the “faculties,” 2) a common or general “interest”; and 3) the capability of communicating the general interest. What was at stake was a position in the historical archive, a collective name in the history of culture and ideas.

Now, what does Próspero mean by the reconciliation of “faculties”? What is a “faculty”? Christoph Menke’s history of the modern, secular, and aesthetic discourse on “faculties” helps to elucidate Próspero’s formulation. For Menke, aesthetics represents a moment in the philosophy of history in which a specifically modern subject, conceived as *force* (*vis, facultas*), emerges:

In the traditional grammatical sense established by Boethius’ translation of Aristotle’s terminology, ‘subject’ has meant a carrier of qualities or predicates. In Baumgarten, by contrast, ‘subjects’ becomes the name of that ‘substance’ which has ‘forces’ (greater or

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<sup>40</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 51. Not many years later, a young Marx would fantasize about a social state where individuals were not bound to a single function: “For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.” See *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 59.



smaller), whose ‘realization’ (easier or more difficult) enables him to do something. Having forces makes something or someone a ‘subject.’<sup>41</sup>

Immersed within various, as it were, gravitational ‘forces,’ the aesthetic subject gains existence through its manifold possibilities of *doing* (*kraft*). But this also means that its possibilities of doing are *manifold*: “subjectivity is the self-relation of and with forces.”<sup>42</sup> *Facultas*, then, implies the realization of a certain power, one amongst many ‘forces,’ which could materialized in any given subject.

But what I want to highlight in Menke’s reading is his rejection of the individual’s inherent powers as the definitive factor of faculties. For him, they are determined above all by the production and consumption of certain ‘goods.’ This is what Menke calls the ‘teleological’ structure of faculties:

And to have a faculty means to have the faculty to *do something*: to be able to perform, to realize something. This implies that a faculty is defined by what it can bring about. Its structure, then, is essentially teleological: it is related to a good or a sort of goodness [...] To exercise a faculty *means* to realize the good towards which the particular faculty is directed. Failure to realize this good implies that the faculty has not been exercised – or that it has been exercised only inadequately or insufficiently. To have a faculty does not mean to generally cause some kind of effect but, rather, to be able to realize this particular good. To have a faculty means to be able to achieve the success of something.<sup>43</sup>

Faculties are teleological in the sense that they can only be inferred from the ‘good’ they make real. Like in the case of prophets, one recognizes them by their fruit. Also, a faculty may be inferred from the *lack* (or deformation) of the good that ought to logically support its existence.

Thus, each faculty’s teleological structure constitutes its *general character*:

That faculties are not defined (causally) by their effects but (teleologically) by their achievements also indicates their essential generality. *What* we are able to do is perform not merely an action but an activity or a *mode* of action [...] If ‘force’ must be understood,

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<sup>41</sup> Christoph Menke, *Force: A Fundamental Concept of Aesthetic Anthropology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 32.

<sup>42</sup> Menke, 35.

<sup>43</sup> Menke, 42.

in Baumgarten's terms, as a subjective faculty, then the self-realization of a force consists in the particular realization of a general activity. And if we can call a general activity a 'praxis,' then the faculty of the subject consists in that subject's realization of, or participation in, a praxis.<sup>44</sup>

A faculty's "self-realization" implies a *successful* link between an individual subject and a general practice; it is not the fulfillment of a personal power, for a "particular realization" always occurs within a sense of "general activity." Thus, each aesthetic subject is constituted through its particular performance of a general praxis.

Then, in *Ariel*, what are the "faculties" that constitute the aesthetic subject ("the agent defined by the totality of his faculties and capacities," in Menke's formulation)? The question is an invitation to byzantine debates, which Próspero seems to encourage rather than deter. For instance, echoing the humanist topic, he states:

"[I]a belleza incomparable de Atenas [...] nacen de que aquella ciudad de prodigios fundó su concepción de la vida en el concierto de todas las facultades humanas, en la libre y acordada expansión de todas las energías [...] Atenas supo engrandecer a la vez el sentido de lo ideal y el de lo real, la razón y el instinto, las fuerzas del espíritu y las del cuerpo. Cinceló las cuatro faces del alma."<sup>45</sup>

At another moment, he reprises Renan: "el fin de la criatura humana no puede exclusivamente saber, ni sentir, ni imaginar, sino real y enteramente *humana*..."<sup>46</sup> In any case, many such examples could be brought about but no clear-cut definition of faculties would emerge.

But the question might be otherwise approached. If, as Menke suggests, the faculties are fundamentally practical – that is, if their teleology depends on the social goods they achieve – then their existence might be derived by the fruits of their labor. In fact, *Ariel*'s fourth section expounds a conceptualization of the production, interrelations and distribution of two *distinct* kinds of

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<sup>44</sup> Menke, 43.

<sup>45</sup> Rodó, *Ariel*, 156.

<sup>46</sup> Rodó, 153.

‘goods:’ “positive” and “spiritual” goods. *Ariel’s* notion of faculties, thus, is determined by the interrelated spheres of production and consumption of these two distinct but interrelated kinds of ‘goods’ --“positive” goods, which represent a “material advantage,” and “intellectual and moral goods,” which embody “spiritual superiority.” Below, I will deal with what I call Próspero’s Law of the Equivalence of Forces (interactions of ‘positive’ and ‘spiritual’ goods in a market).

As an “arrangement” of “faculties,” then, Próspero’s aesthetic subject exists in so far as it is able to master the kind of cultural production and consumption implied in the term “spirit.” Thus, the aesthetic subject materializes in the awareness of the *distinction* among goods and practices, in the acceptance of different markets. To be mutilated means that the subject has been constituted simply through the praxis of “la cultura unilateral:” “...la deformidad y el empequeñecimiento son, en el alma de los individuos, el resultado de un exclusivo objeto impuesto a la acción y un solo modo de cultura...”<sup>47</sup> This notion of “cultura unilateral” would remain crucial until the 1970s, from José Ingenieros to Herbert Marcuse. But let us remark that, for Próspero, “spirit” can also represent “la cultura unilateral:” he was critical of aestheticism detached from social and practical concerns. The harmony of faculties involved *both* the “positive” and the “spiritual.”

For Próspero, the “obstruction” (*obliterar*) of a faculty - marked by its failure to produce a particular kind of good - implied the corresponding “loss” of a general “interest.” But his understanding of the “general interest” is not very clear. Próspero defines it both as “un alto interés de todos” and “un elemento desinteresado e ideal.” That is, many times Próspero praises a notion of the “general interest” that indeed is a form of “disinterest.” Of course, here Próspero enters into

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<sup>47</sup> Rodó, 157-158.

Kant's idea of aesthetic disinterestedness in the *Critique of Judgment* (1796): "Taste is the faculty of judging an object or a mode of representation by means of a delight or aversion *apart from any interest*. The object of such a delight is called *beautiful*."<sup>48</sup> Recently, Jan Mieszkowski interpreted Kant's formulation of aesthetic disinterestedness as the *longing for a sensus communis*.<sup>49</sup> For Kant, aesthetic knowledge could never refer to the real qualities of an object, for the aesthetic was indifferent to the object's actual existence: "All one wants to know is whether the mere representation of the object is to my liking, no matter how indifferent I may be to the existence of the object of this representation."<sup>50</sup> Thus, for Kant, aesthetic pleasure does not involve the faculty of desire, and the "interest" associated with it, because it is "indifferent" to the object of its pleasure. Thus, an aesthetic judgment expresses a free relation of between a subject and an object; that is, a relation not overdetermined by the object's dominion over the desiring subject.

This, however, did not mean that the predicate of *beauty* was empty. It meant that aesthetic judgments revealed something not about the object that passively receives it, but about the subject who enunciated it. In an interesting footnote, full of sociological insight, Kant notes that "of themselves, judgments of taste do not even set up any interest whatsoever. Only in society is it *interesting* to have taste..."<sup>51</sup> Thus, the judging subject is free from its object, thus it only exists in relation to other judging subjects:

judgments of that [aesthetic] kind have no bearing upon the object. But for this very reason the aesthetic universality attributed to a judgment must also be of a special kind, seeing that it does not join the predicate of beauty to the concept of the object taken in its entire logical sphere, and yet those extend this predicate over the whole sphere of *judging subjects*.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, ed. Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 42.

<sup>49</sup> See Jan Mieszkowski, *Labors of Imagination: Aesthetics and Political Economy from Kant to Althusser* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

<sup>50</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 37. Although I follow the logic of Mieszkowski's argument, I will quote directly from the original source.

<sup>51</sup> Kant, 37.

<sup>52</sup> Kant, 46.

If the subject has no “interest” in the “beautiful” object, the grounds of its judgment may be “presuppose[d] in every other person.” And such a presupposition constitutes what an aesthetic judgment is: “Here, now, we may perceive that nothing is postulated in the judgment of taste but such a *universal voice* [...] consequently, only the *possibility* of an aesthetic judgment capable of being at the same time deemed valid for everyone.”<sup>53</sup> As Mieszkowski argues, what the judgment of taste *postulates* – from the Latin *postulare*: “to demand, to request” – is a form of language: “A judgment of taste is a demand for its own universality, or better, it is a demand for a voice, a language, in and through which such a judgment could be articulated.”<sup>54</sup>

For Kant, every aesthetic judgment contained the transcendental ground of its own possibility, that is, “common sense” (*sensus communis*): “The judgment of taste, therefore, depends on our presupposing the existence of a common sense. (But this is not to be taken to mean some external sense, but the effect arising from the free play of our powers of cognition.)”<sup>55</sup> *Sensus communis* is defined as “a subjective principle, and one which determines what pleases or displeases, by means of feeling only and not through concepts, but yet with universal validity.”<sup>56</sup> Only the existence of a *sensus communis* explains “the necessity of the assent of *all* to a judgment regarded as exemplifying a universal rule which cannot be formulated.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, every aesthetic judgment is *exemplary*; that is, it is an instance of *sensus communis* - the “universal rule which cannot be formulated:” “Here I put forward my judgment of taste as an example of the judgment of common sense, and attribute to it on that account *exemplary* validity. Hence common sense is a mere ideal norm.”<sup>58</sup> This is to say that aesthetic judgments *do not* formulate *sensus communis*,

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<sup>53</sup> Kant, 47.

<sup>54</sup> Mieszkowski, *Labors*, 19.

<sup>55</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 65.

<sup>56</sup> Kant, 68.

<sup>57</sup> Kant, 67.

<sup>58</sup> Kant, 69.

but rather they essay its conditions of possibility. In other words, the philosophical task of grounding aesthetic “disinterest” was but the task of *affirming* the possibility of a universal, common sense.

I find very telling Mieszkowski’s reading of Kant’s aesthetic disinterest as the longing for a common sense, for I find such a longing in *Ariel’s* alternative formulations between disinterest/general interest:

Pero dentro de la misma complejidad de nuestra cultura; dentro de la diferenciación progresiva de caracteres, de aptitudes, de méritos, que es la ineludible consecuencia del progreso en el desenvolvimiento social, cabe salvar una razonable participación de todos en ciertas ideas y sentimientos fundamentales que mantengan la unidad y el concierto de la vida – en ciertos *intereses del alma*, ante los cuales la dignidad del ser racional no consiente la indiferencia de ninguno de nosotros.<sup>59</sup>

To be sure, Kant’s and Próspero’s notions of a “common sense” are not identical. For Kant, aesthetic disinterest constituted the *possibility* of universal agreement (it was pure *form* lacking a specific content). In turn, Rodó is emphatic that aesthetic culture should cultivate “ciertas ideas y sentimientos” in which everybody could participate. In fact, Rodó’s notion of *sensus communis* is closer to Gramsci’s than to Kant’s purely negative definition.

But the fact remains: aesthetic “disinterest” expressed a desire for an ideal, universal community of “judging subjects.” “Spirit,” thus, not only represents another market – different than that of positive goods – but also a space of recognition among subjects, a place of social articulation (only within society does it make sense to have taste, as Kant said). Indeed, “objects” produced within the market of “spirit” are determined by this function: “salvar una razonable participación de todos en ciertas ideas y sentimientos fundamentales.” They are determined by the antithesis of Darío’s acritic poetry and his search for absolute originality. Notice also that such

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<sup>59</sup> Rodó, *Ariel*, 79.

aesthetic function has less to do with the critique of specialization, as Julio Ramos would want it, than with feelings and ideas that could guarantee the existence of a “general interest.”

For Próspero, then, aesthetics ultimately posed a communication problem. As Mieszkowski pointed out, aesthetic disinterest, along with its universality, were but the demand for a particular kind of language. And Rodó’s critique of Darío involved a claim for “el habla común,” out of which emerged “el espíritu de la raza.” This might be *Ariel’s* fundamental concern: literary language’s *communicability*. For Próspero, beauty was but a strategy for the propagation of ideas, a strategy of cultural distribution: “Es inmensa la parte que corresponde al don de descubrir y revelar la íntima belleza de las ideas, en la eficacia de las grandes revoluciones morales.”<sup>60</sup> Beauty, in fact, was a kind of “prestigio exterior,” by which doctrine “anhela transmitirse en las formas de lo delicado y lo selecto.” It was “la poesía del precepto, es decir, su belleza íntima.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, Próspero’s “habla común” involved literary language’s duty: the transmission of ideas, where poetry, so to speak, *lent* its prestige to the content to be communicated. The epitome of such “habla común” were St. Paul’s epistles, where Christian teaching is expressed with Greek perfection.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, aesthetics posed a question of great political importance: “Pálida gloria será la de las épocas y las comuniones que menosprecien esa relación estética de su vida o de su propaganda.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, epochs that made this mistake, that abandoned the aesthetic dimension of their propaganda, occupy a lowly place in the history of culture: Próspero mentions early Christian ascetism, American puritanism and Victorian England. Furthermore, critics who draw the image of a naïve,

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<sup>60</sup> Rodó, 166.

<sup>61</sup> Rodó, 167.

<sup>62</sup> Rodó, 168.

<sup>63</sup> Rodó, 167.

idealist Rodó might be surprised to find out that Próspero identifies literary universalism with “el genio de la propaganda:”

En el carácter de los pueblos, los dones derivados de un gusto fino, el dominio de las formas graciosas, la delicada aptitud de interesar, la virtud de hacer amables las ideas, se identifican, además, con el <<genio de la propaganda>> - es decir, con el don poderoso de la universalidad.<sup>64</sup>

As I have shown, what was at stake was a place in the history of culture and ideas. For Próspero, the “prestigio exterior” of ideas, their “amability” (not only their courtesy towards the reader or listener, but the fact that ideas become objects of love and desire), rather than their content, explained France’s place in history:

Bien sabido es que, en mucha parte, a la posesión de aquellos atributos escogidos debe referirse la significación *humana* que el espíritu francés acierta a comunicar a cuanto elige y consagra. Las ideas adquieren alas potentes y veloces no en el helado seno de la abstracción, sino en el luminoso y cálido ambiente de la forma. Su superioridad de difusión, su prevalencia a veces, dependen de que las Gracias las hayan bañado con su luz.<sup>65</sup>

For Próspero, then, literary form implied a kind of uterine receptacle of ideological content, against the cold breast of abstraction. *Human* meaning was but a product of literary style, and literary language was defined by its aesthetic communicability.

I would like to propose one more twist to the aesthetic problem of communication, which, in passing, Próspero suggest in another use of the term “interest.” In a passage previously quoted, Próspero offered several definitions of the “espíritu de propaganda,” amongst which one sticks out: “la delicada aptitud de interesar.” The problem of communication could be reformulated by a close reading of this sentence. Communication can thus imply the *art of becoming interesting oneself*, an art of seduction, seeking the recognition of one’s uniqueness. Próspero’s “habla común” did not seek to do “violence to an implied other on whom one’s words are to be cut,” as

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<sup>64</sup> Rodó, 171.

<sup>65</sup> Rodó, 171.



Roberto González Echeverría argued. It rather wished to *seduce* its audience, something which can, of course, imply symbolic violence, but in a different sense. Próspero's notions of "mutilation" and the aesthetic subject – the links among "faculties," "interests" and "communication" in a process of either waste or synthesis – could be mundanely summed up in this *becoming interesting*. The aesthetic subject was, fundamentally, a seducer whose beloved was posterity – a place in the archives.

#### *IV. Forms of Capital: Leisure (The Hospitable King and the Slave-Philosopher)*

The meaningful center of *Ariel's* second section – the story of the hospitable (also referred to as the patriarchal) king – is one of the lecture's most famous passages. The narration is structured around the description two antithetical spaces: the hospitable king's palace, opened to the commerce of the world and all of its multifarious characters; and the king's cell-like private chamber (*estancia*), into which he retires to recollect in solitude. The king's palace is described as the site of his "infinite liberality": a quasi-paradisiacal place in which the poor find material comfort, the peasants gather to rest, and the merchants engage in their respective trades. It is, in a sense, a public market, which the king contemplates with gladness. Once inside his private chamber, however, this liberality turns into "ascético egoísmo."<sup>66</sup> The activities that take place there belong to a different kind: "Pensar, soñar, admirar: he ahí los nombres de los sutiles visitantes de mi celda."<sup>67</sup> Acoustically, the palace is filled with the noise of human and animal life, while in the private chamber reigns a silence compared by Próspero to a deep ocean cave. Alone, in silence, numbed by "la casta esencia del nenúfar, el perfume sugeridor del adormecimiento penseroso y de la contemplación del propio ser," the king finds true freedom.<sup>68</sup> The story's moral is not hard to

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<sup>66</sup> Rodó, *Ariel*, 159.

<sup>67</sup> Rodó, 161.

<sup>68</sup> Rodó, 160.

figure out - the self must be like the ‘hospitable king,’ involved in the business of the world yet also protective of his “interiority.”

The definitive reading of the hospitable king’s story is still Roberto González Echeverría’s *The Case of the Speaking Statue*. There, González Echeverría interprets (or we should we say, deconstructs?) the duplicity that structures Prospero’s story. For him, what the hospitable king’s secret chamber – “half palace and half bunker” – shelters is “the very inner being of the master.”<sup>69</sup> It is meant to defend the source of its authority and self-presence: “Here being can be itself, identity is found in chaste indivisibility, in inviolable self-presence.”<sup>70</sup> And yet, the king’s secret chamber is, in González Echeverría own words, a ruse: “...rather than the lightness of spirit of the softness of voice, the building evokes the weight and substantiality of stone; instead of a free, generous exchange, it represents a defensive posture, an exclusion.”<sup>71</sup> Ultimately, “what this elaborate building betrays is the strategic nature of the appeal to voice. Voice is but a ruse, for Prospero is not merely persuasive but magisterial, even kingly. It is a voice that attempts to be inscribed, sealed, chiseled, wounded on the listeners.”<sup>72</sup> The hospitable king’s inner chamber basically revealed Próspero’s hypocrisy: the fact that, behind his magisterial rhetoric of “light” and “air,” there was a form of symbolic violence at work; that, rather than “dialogic exchange,” magisterial authority was founded on “an enclosure in which the building, like a shell, hardens into shape around a vacuum.”<sup>73</sup>

Gonzalez Echeverría notices that, paradoxically, Prospero tells the story of the hospitable king to illustrate that “even when enslaved with utilitarian concerns, the soul can preserve its ‘inner

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<sup>69</sup> González Echeverría, *The Case of the Speaking Statue*, 21-22.

<sup>70</sup> González Echeverría, 22.

<sup>71</sup> González Echeverría, 25.

<sup>72</sup> González Echeverría, 25.

<sup>73</sup> González Echeverría, 25.

freedom,' that is, the freedom of reason and of feeling." But his argument emphasizes the kingly aspects of the king, as it were, in order to establish a link between the figure of the teacher and the figure of the dictator, the two hegemonic forms of patriarchal authority in modern Latin American literature.<sup>74</sup> But this leaves to the side the crucial fact that the king is, at one point, directly compared to a slave. And this is not the only comparison between the hospitable king and a slave that occurs in the second part of Próspero's lecture. Furthermore, they are not regular slaves: both of them are slave-philosophers. Here, I will propose a re-reading of the hospitable king's story, a reading aided by the other crucial character in *Ariel's* second section: the slave-philosopher.<sup>75</sup> I will show that the relations between the hospitable king and the slave-philosopher point towards the conditions necessary for the production of aesthetic subject: leisure time. For Próspero, the capital necessary to produce the "aesthetic" subject was, ultimately, leisure time.<sup>76</sup>

Indeed, the king's private chamber is not only spatially isolated from the rest of the palace but belongs to a different kind of temporality altogether. The palace was surrounded by the healthy activity of economic life: the peasants gathered, the merchants traded, the women washed clothes on the river. When the hospitable king retires to his secret chamber in order to think, dream and admire, he actually retires to enjoy a particular use of time:

Los antiguos los clasificaban dentro de su noble inteligencia del *ocio*, que ellos tenían por el más elevado empleo de una existencia verdaderamente racional, identificándolo con la

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<sup>74</sup> "...the dictator figure clearly embodies paternal authority. This authority is the same as that which supports the essayistic tradition," 14.

<sup>75</sup> I follow Rodríguez Monegal, who, in the introduction to his edition of Rodó's complete works, calls this character "el esclavo filósofo."

<sup>76</sup> For the relations between humanism, leisure time and culture see Josef Pipier, *Leisure, the basis of culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952); Michael O'Loughlin's extraordinary *The Garlands of Repose. The Literary Celebration of Civic and Retired Leisure: the Traditions of Homer and Vergil, Horace and Montaigne* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle-Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), especially "Labor Time in the 'Crisis' of the Fourteenth Century: From Medieval Time to Modern Time."

libertad del pensamiento emancipado de todo innoble yugo. El ocio noble era la inversión del tiempo que oponían, como expresión de la vida superior, a la actividad económica<sup>77</sup>

Notice that, in this passage, to think, dream and admire, do not represent idle, unproductive activities. Rodó was a dexterous rhetorician, particularly crafty at creating sentences in which a single word can produce an unsuspected depth of meaning. Here, noble leisure is defined in Spanish as “la inversión del tiempo” opposed to economic activity. In English, *inversión* could be translated in two different ways, both of which are contained in the Spanish original: as *reversal* or as *investment*. On the one hand, then, *inversión* implies a different phenomenological experience from market-time, the time of “adormecimiento penseroso.” More importantly, however, noble leisure and economic activity represent two different logics of *investing* the same capital: time. The king’s palace was bustling with economic activity, which invests the subject’s time in a mode of production determined by the demands of the market. On the contrary, noble leisure invests the subject’s time according to a different logic, that of ‘high’ culture, which, for Rodó, was the logic of subjective synthesis. Paradoxically, noble leisure was noble because it was not wasteful: it was meant to produce and sustain a sphere of ‘high’ culture from which, ultimately, cultural prestige could be reaped as profit, Prospero’s “immortal vegetation.”

But what kind of king is this, who needs to “preserve his inner freedom” from the enslavement of utilitarian concerns? The king’s true situation is further illuminated when we consider the other figure that constantly emerges in *Ariel*’s second section: the slave, or, if we are to be precise, the slave-philosopher. Both figures, the king and the slave, maintain a very tense exchange during this section. Just at its beginning, for example, even before telling the story of the ‘hospitable king,’ Prospero enunciates his project for a harmonious self through the figure of a

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<sup>77</sup> Rodó, *Ariel*, 161.

slave: “El verso célebre en que el esclavo de la escena antigua afirmó que, pues era hombre, no le era ajeno nada de lo humano, forma parte de los gritos que, por su sentido inagotable, resonarán eternamente en la conciencia de la humanidad.”<sup>78</sup> Significantly, it is not a slave who pronounces this verse in Terence’s comedy, but a landowner. This is either a meaningful slip in Rodó’s memory or an interested alteration, and perhaps both. Furthermore, the story of the ‘hospitable king’ itself is bracketed between two passages which use the image of the slave. We have already encountered the first passage, which immediately antecedes the narration of the story and acts as an ideological introduction to it: “No entreguéis nunca a la utilidad o a la pasión, sino una parte de vosotros. Aun dentro de la esclavitud material, hay la posibilidad de salvar la libertad interior: la de la razón y el sentimiento.”<sup>79</sup>

The second passage takes the relation between the hospitable king and the slave-philosopher to its most ambiguous. Indeed, after telling the story of the hospitable king, Prospero considers its lesson: to be a whole subject, it is necessary to establish a certain *rhythm* between the space/time of utilitarian work and the space/time of ‘noble’ leisure. As Prospero is prone to, he illustrates this with a further story... with a slave as its protagonist! It is the story of Cleanthes and his two-fold activity. It is worth reading without paraphrase:

La escuela estoica, que iluminó el ocaso de la antigüedad como por un anticipado resplandor del cristianismo, nos ha legado una sencilla y conmovedora imagen de la salvación de la libertad interior, aun en medio de los rigores de la servidumbre, en la hermosa figura de Cleanto; de aquel Cleanto que, obligado a emplear la fuerza de sus brazos de atleta en sumergir el cubo de una fuente y mover la piedra de un molino, concedía a la meditación las treguas del quehacer miserable y trazaba, con encallecida mano, sobre las piedras del camino, las máximas oídas de labios de Zenón. Toda educación racional, todo perfecto cultivo de nuestra naturaleza, tomarán por punto de partida la posibilidad de estimular en cada uno de nosotros, la doble actividad que simboliza Cleanto.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Rodó, 154

<sup>79</sup> Rodó, 158

<sup>80</sup> Rodó, 161-162.

Although stoic philosopher Cleanthes was never actually a slave, his image as a slave-philosopher widely circulated within European intellectuals working on “Hellenistic” culture, such as Walter Pater, Ernst Renan and Jules Michelet. Actually, Cleanthes was only one in a series of such slave-philosophers. This passage by Spanish intellectual and socialist politician Fernando Garrido Tortosa (1821-1883) can be considered emblematic of the slave-philosopher *topos*: “No es posible creer que un Plauto, que un Cleanto el filósofo, que un Epícteto encontraran natural su esclavitud; mejor queremos pensar que aquellos grandes hombres eran los Espartacos de la inteligencia. Si en sus brazos llevaban las cadenas de la esclavitud, en sus ojos debía brillar el genio de la libertad.”<sup>81</sup> Such images must have been alluring to Enlightened elites all over Europe and America – slaves who found wisdom through inner freedom, whose arms carried their chains while their eye’s brimmed with freedom.

But what interests me in the interplay between the hospitable king and slave-philosopher are their relations to a specific kind of capital: leisure time. Indeed, as Pierre Bourdieu would theorize many years later, the link between the economic and cultural worlds is *time*, or different forms of time. For Bourdieu, economic accumulation could not be directly translated into cultural production – accumulation only indirectly granted the capital to invest in culture, leisure time.<sup>82</sup> The relations between the hospitable king and the slave-philosopher are, in this sense, quantitative rather than qualitative: the king’s greatest accumulation of wealth, translated into leisure time, allows him to retire to his sanctuary; Cleanthes servitude means he is forced to write Zenon’s maxims using rocks, in his moments of *rest*. But both relations to the production and consumption of culture imply a *surplus* of time, which can only result from accumulated labor - one’s own or

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<sup>81</sup> Fernando Garrido Tortosa, *Historia de las clases trabajadoras* (Madrid: Imprenta de T. Nuñez Amor, 1870).

<sup>82</sup> “...the link between economic and cultural capital is established through the mediation of the time needed for acquisitions [...] time free from economic necessity, which is the precondition for the initial accumulation [of cultural capital].” Bourdieu, “Forms of Capital,” 19.

another's, which is the fundamental difference between the hospitable king and the slave-philosopher.<sup>83</sup> The interplay between their figures thus comes to reveal the fundamental condition for the production of the aesthetic subject: leisure time.

Thus, rather than the site of the “master’s” absolute self-presence, Próspero’s story of the hospitable king, read in relation to his *alter-ego* the slave-philosopher, points to a more ambiguous, less solid place for cultural authority than the one posited by Roberto González Echeverría. Indeed, Rodó’s integral subject is neither king nor slave, but something in between. It might not even be a “master.” The hospitable king’s secret chamber is no bunker where magisterial authority is constituted and protected. It is something much less dramatic. It rather resembles the private studio of a bourgeois home, where the “master” may retire after a day of work to read, write and enjoy the *surplus* of time produced by accumulated labor, his own and others’.

#### *V. Prospero’s Law of the Equivalence of Forces: On Positive and Spiritual Goods*

So far, we have examined several of the characters (individual and collective) that make up *Ariel’s* aesthetic drama: “youth,” the mutilated man, the aesthetic subject, the hospitable king and the slave philosopher. We have now reached our final actor. It makes a brief and almost shy appearance in the second section, like someone invited to a party and then forgotten about. When discussing the paradoxical state of civilization – mainly, the *necessity* of professionalization for the sake of economic progress, against its perceived threat to cultural production and social cohesion – Prospero quotes Comte:

Augusto Comte ha señalado bien este peligro de las civilizaciones avanzadas. Un alto estado de perfeccionamiento social tiene para él un grave inconveniente en la facilidad con que suscita la aparición de espíritus deformados y estrechos; de espíritus <<muy capaces bajo un aspecto único y monstruosamente ineptos bajo todos los otros>>. El

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<sup>83</sup> See Moishe Postone, “The Dialectic of Labor and Time,” in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

empequeñecimiento de un cerebro humano por el comercio continuo de un solo género de ideas, por el ejercicio indefinido de un solo modo de actividad, es para Comte un resultado comparable a la mísera suerte del obrero a quien la división del trabajo de taller obliga a consumir en la invariable operación de un detalle mecánico todas las energías de su vida. En uno y otro caso, el efecto moral es inspirar una desastrosa indiferencia por el aspecto general de los intereses de la humanidad.<sup>84</sup>

One could argue that, in the previous passage, the worker (*obrero*) does not even appear in the form of a character - it is an element in a comparison, the purpose of which is actually to illustrate the process of professionalization. And yet, this particular textual position is precisely what defines the character of the worker. Although Prospero, through Comte, tried to dissolve the distancing effect of the comparison into the 'general interests of humanity,' the worker and his work ("el trabajo de taller") remain in this passage a suppressed element, one that makes its presence known only at the level of a rhetorical device.

And yet, such rhetorical employment of the figure of the worker is not at all rare in *Ariel*. As we saw, in the lecture's first section, a Whitmanian praise of energy and youth, Prospero defines youth as work and capital: "La juventud que vivís es una fuerza de cuya aplicación sois los obreros y un tesoro de cuya inversión sois responsables."<sup>85</sup> Just before the section ends, Prospero again compares his students to workers: "Vosotros, los que vais a pasar, como el obrero en marcha a los talleres que le esperan, bajo el pórtico del nuevo siglo, ¿reflejaréis quizá sobre el arte que os estudie imágenes más luminosas y triunfales que las que han quedado de nosotros?"<sup>86</sup> The triumphant notes of this passage are the more striking when we consider that, when quoting Comte, the workshop was described as the site of mechanical, time- and energy-wasting, labor. Here, a synthesis between the two elements is not even attempted. Rather, the comparison again establishes a distance. We can see the professionals and the workers both marching towards the

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<sup>84</sup> Rodó, *Ariel*, 155.

<sup>85</sup> Rodó, 142.

<sup>86</sup> Rodó, 148.



new century, *juntos pero no revueltos*, as the proverb would have it. What then are we to make of this persistent metaphor, so marginal its role and so ubiquitous its presence?

The “obrero” as metaphor is related to what Prospero, this time quoting Jules Fouillée, described as the ‘law of the equivalence of forces:’

La relación entre los bienes positivos y los bienes intelectuales y morales es, pues, según la adecuada comparación de Fouillée, un nuevo aspecto de la cuestión de la equivalencia de las fuerzas que, así como permite transformar el movimiento en calórico, permite también obtener, de las ventajas materiales, elementos de superioridad espiritual.<sup>87</sup>

In this passage, a thermodynamic principle (the conversion of mechanic movement into heat) is used to describe a particular relation of production between what Prospero terms positive goods and spiritual goods. This law establishes that the relation between these two kinds of goods is not antagonistic, but reciprocal (so much for Próspero’s naive idealism!). Just as mechanical movement can be turned into energy, an increase in material welfare can, under the right circumstances, be transformed into the spiritual goods of ‘high’ culture. What is left to be determined is, of course, what these right circumstances are. How does the transformation from the positive to the spiritual actually take place? As Prospero would have it, it is only a matter of natural physics. Here, I will argue that the metaphor of the worker will provide the key to clarifying this particular dynamic of material and cultural production, the relations between “el espíritu de especialización” and “el trabajo de taller” that were mentioned in a previous section of this chapter.

Prospero’s law of the equivalence of forces is fully developed in *Ariel*’s fourth section. The larger argument in this section involves a liberal defense of science and democracy, which were at the time being accused by many important thinkers (Carlyle, Renan, Nietzsche) of producing only a mediocre, *false* culture – the culture of the mutilated men. Here, science must be understood not

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<sup>87</sup> Rodó, 217.

only in relation to the natural sciences, but also to the professionalization and specialization of humanistic disciplines (as in Nietzsche's accusations against the mediocrity of philologists, Schopenhauer's verbal spite towards academic philosophers, or Kierkegaard's criticism of education).<sup>88</sup> According to this line of thinking, the reason why the utilitarian principle outweighed the aesthetic, disinterested principle in the modern world could be explained by both the revelations from science and the triumph of democratic ideals. Furthermore, both phenomena were presently joined in a common social principle: utilitarianism, or material welfare for the largest number of people. This particular association between science and democracy under the 'utilitarian' principle was considered adverse to the *selective* nature of culture, which depended for its production on the existence of a spiritual elite. Prospero goes to great lengths in actually justifying such fears: a misunderstood democratic practice, just as a misunderstood scientific practice, could indeed produce the tyranny of mutilated men and the triumph of all things mediocre.

But against the essential opposition between the 'utilitarian' principle and the 'aesthetic' principle, Prospero offers the law of the equivalence of forces. In what might seem a surprising moment for critics who consider Rodó the epitome of idealism, *Ariel's* fourth section opens with a defense of utilitarianism, generally defined as self-interested economic activity:

La inculcación de utilitarismo estrecho que suele dirigirse al espíritu de nuestro siglo, en nombre del ideal, y con rigores de anatema, se funda, en parte, sobre el desconocimiento de que sus titánicos esfuerzos por la subordinación de las fuerzas de la naturaleza a la voluntad humana y por la extensión del bienestar material, son un trabajo necesario que

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<sup>88</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2004) and "Homer and Classical Philology," in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* (London: Foulis, 1909). And is not *The Birth of Tragedy* a literary effort to make the classics objects of aesthetics rather than of philology? See also Arthur Schopenhauer, "On University Philosophy," in *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays, vol. 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments, Johannes Climacus*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

preparará, como el laborioso enriquecimiento de una tierra agotada, la florescencia de idealismos futuros.<sup>89</sup>

Prospero's apology is based on an understanding of utilitarianism as the *prerequisite*, not the antithesis, for the production of spiritual goods. In this passage, utilitarian work is more particularly defined as the subordination of nature to human will that results in widespread material welfare. Notice that such a formulation obscures both the object of such labor and its subject, hypostatizing the former into the mythical 'forces of nature' and the latter into the mythical agency of a general human will. Furthermore, the work itself is qualified as pre-liminary, as acquiring its full meaning only in a different form of production, for which, paradoxically, it is the condition.

And notice also that the "land" metaphor, which was examined in the second section of this chapter, reappears. There, we said that the "land" metaphor, applied to the production of "youth," signified both the possibility of bareness and of future splendor, if only properly inseminated by language. This semantic constellation is here actualized, suggesting that present utilitarianism works "como el laborioso enriquecimiento de una tierra agotada," which will produce the flowers of the future. Attention to lexicon must be paid. Both the English 'enrichment' and the Spanish 'enriquecimiento' carry more than one meaning: to amass riches and to fertilize the soil. In this sense, utilitarianism is again postulated as the prerequisite of idealism – "enriquecimiento" implies that the accumulation of wealth and the fertilizing of the soil that will produce the future cultural blossoming are the same thing.

The relation between positive and spiritual goods, mediated by the metaphor of the worker, is again brought to light when Prospero, quoting Paul Bourget, characterizes science and democracy as the 'obreras' of the future: "La democracia y la ciencia son, en efecto, los dos

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<sup>89</sup> Rodó, *Ariel*, 175.

insustituibles soportes sobre los que nuestra civilización descansa; o, expresándolo con una frase de Bourget, las dos ‘obreras’ de nuestros destinos futuros...”<sup>90</sup> Here, the agricultural metaphor has been substituted by a figuration with an emphatic industrial character. But the implied dynamic between positive and spiritual goods is not that different – the latter depend on the former. But the metaphors acquire more meaning when we consider that in *Ariel*’s second section, the hospitable king and the slave-philosopher existed in relation to a kind of capital: leisure. Here, science and democracy are described as “obreras” of the future, “los dos insustituibles soportes sobre los que nuestra civilización descansa.” Again, attention to language is indispensable. For what is implied by the formulation that “nuestra civilización descansa” on the “soportes” provided by the workers of our future destiny, is not only that civilization depends on these workers, but that civilization is nothing but the leisure produced by their accumulated labor. Thus, the industrial metaphor produced a qualitative distinction between the products of science and democracy (unified within the economic principle of material welfare for the greatest number of people) and the products of ‘civilization:’ a distinction based on the accumulation of work and its *surplus* of leisure. In this sense, it seems to me that Prospero’s law of the equivalence of forces described a one-way circuit in which industrial labor was to be transformed into leisure and high culture, while actually remaining incommensurable with them.

Prospero was aware of this situation. The last appearance the worker makes in *Ariel*’s fourth section is an act of closure, even of redemption. This time, Prospero’s metaphor is taken neither from agriculture nor industry, but from the moral ‘inspirations’ given to human beings by Nature itself. In this sense, we could say that this third and final metaphor is the least metaphorical of all, the one in which the two elements involved are brought closer together, suggesting even an

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<sup>90</sup> Rodó, 187.

identification. The inspiration that Nature whispers through Prospero's lips concerns the importance and dignity of the 'small ones' in every grand natural process:

las afirmaciones de la ciencia contribuyen a sancionar y fortalecer en la sociedad el espíritu de la democracia, revelando cuánto es el valor natural del esfuerzo colectivo; cuál la grandeza de la obra de los pequeños: cuán inmensa la parte de acción reservada al colaborador anónimo y oscuro en cualquiera [sic] manifestación del desenvolvimiento universal.<sup>91</sup>

Nature reveals what Prospero, with great rhetorical skill, calls 'the greatness of the small ones,' the process by which "todo el impulso ascendente de las formas orgánicas" is derived from "la vibración de la célula informe y primitiva."<sup>92</sup> The *trans-latio* of this process from the space of the natural to the space of the social (a translation that is given the name of *morals*) implies a dignification of the "heroísmo, a menudo abnegado, de las muchedumbres, la parte que le negaba el silencio en la gloria del héroe individual."<sup>93</sup>

Furthermore, the analogy implied a particular mode of social production, in as much as vast natural processes were also the image of "la lenta acumulación de las investigaciones que, al través de los siglos, en la sombra, en el taller, o en el laboratorio de obreros olvidados, preparan los hallazgos del genio."<sup>94</sup> In this last appearance of the worker, the precise nature of the work discussed is not clear. What precisely does Prospero mean by the 'investigations' of forgotten workers and the 'findings' of (visible and well-remembered, we must assume) genius? What binds together the shadow, the factory and the laboratory? I would argue that, in this last passage, the organic analogy functions precisely to avoid *content* and to point towards a particular kind of *form*. In other words, the particular relation between positive and spiritual goods in this passage is less

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<sup>91</sup> Rodó, 191.

<sup>92</sup> Rodó, 192.

<sup>93</sup> Rodó, 192.

<sup>94</sup> Rodó, 192.

important than the division, in each sphere, of workers who *amass* and geniuses who *harvest and recollect*. Is not *Ariel* itself a great synthetic effort of quotation, an effort at harmonizing the countless voices of written culture? Thus, the division between workers who *amass* and geniuses who *harvest* functions within the text as a principle of composition.<sup>95</sup>

Looked at from this perspective (the text as the result of the transformation of positive goods into spiritual goods) this distinction points also towards a division of labor *within* the realm of cultural production itself, a division between the slow ‘investigations’ of the “obreros” of culture and their crystallization through the synthetic operation of genius. Rodó’s harmonious concert included the hierarchies that, in his view, made cultural production possible.

We are now in a position to draw a fuller picture of Prospero’s law of the equivalence of forces. As we have seen, the metaphor of the worker can help us understand the process by which positive goods are turned into spiritual goods in *Ariel*’s logic of high cultural production. More importantly, it is the figure’s particular place and function within the rhetorical frame of the text which best illuminates this process. While Prospero’s use of thermodynamic language suggests an organic process in which spiritual goods are derived from material welfare like heat from movement, the metaphor of the worker points towards the actual hiatus that exists in Prospero’s law of the equivalence of forces, the fact that this is not an organic process at all, but rather a one-way circuit.

There are three dimensions to this hiatus:

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<sup>95</sup> As a quoting mechanism which accumulates and synthesizes “Western” culture, we could consider *Ariel*’s mode of composition in relation to Noé Jitrick’s *Las contradicciones del modernismo: productividad poética y situación sociológica* (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 1978), where the Argentinian critic conceives *modernismo* as a “machine” for the multiplication of poetic objects.

1. *A temporal hiatus*: Positive goods are the pre-requisite for the production of spiritual goods. A necessary work that will enrich the wasted soil, as Próspero puts it. Material accumulation is *necessary* before transformation into the spiritual takes place.
2. *A qualitative hiatus*: Positive goods, the result of material accumulation, are not translated into spiritual goods directly but indirectly, as leisure time. The time *surplus* of leisure may be the result of one's own labor, or that of another.
3. *A formal hiatus*: the worker amasses, the genius recollects. This division implies a hierarchy of material and cultural production in which anonymous, specialized work (slowly accumulated over time) is redeemed through the synthetic operation of the genius.

Próspero's law of the equivalence of forces thus described a complex relation between positive and spiritual goods. Regardless of their equivalence, however, they were not reciprocal. The relation between positive and spiritual goods was not organic, but rather functioned one way: a substratum of accumulated labor, which made the enjoyment of leisure possible for some, would always be necessary to produce civilization.

Ultimately, I would argue that the figure of the worker, and the textual place it occupies in Próspero's lecture, signify everything *Ariel* represses – all it implicitly accepts in order for its dream of civilization and genius to be possible. The *obrero* lies beyond the realm of the school and its civilizing influence, as pure labor power: "...la mísera suerte del obrero a quien la división del trabajo de taller obliga a consumir en la invariable operación de un detalle mecánico todas las energías de su vida." This repressed (unclarified) relation between labor and the *surplus* of culture would remain a critical issue for many Spanish American intellectuals who followed on Rodó's footsteps.

## VI. Coda: From 'Ariel' to 'arielismo'

In this chapter, I have read José Enrique Rodó's *Ariel* in relation to the development of national systems of education during the last three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. I began by establishing a distinction between Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío and Rodó, a distinction that, however, happened within the same category of *modernismo*. I argued that the difference between *Prosas profanas* and *Ariel* was the difference between acritic poetics and magisterial authority. The crafting of each of these literary languages responded to different institutions: the novelty and originality of the commodity-market, as Rama argued, in the case of *Prosas profanas*; the need of symbolic reproduction imposed by national schools, in the case of *Ariel*.

Seeking to understand this, I read Prospero's lecture as a drama between different characters: "youth," the mutilated man, the hospitable king and the slave-philosopher, and the worker. This drama illustrates not only the nature of the subject to be produced (the aesthetic subject), but the capital required to produce it ("youth" and leisure-time) and the activities necessary for its proper "investment:" the magisterial voice and the workers' accumulated labor. I tried to show, also, that the anxiety of "waste" was the background upon which the aesthetic subject's play developed. Finally, I tried to show that this logic informed both Rodó's praxis of literary language and Próspero's ideas on beauty as the communicability of ideas through their "prestigio exterior." What was at stake all along was the production of cultural prestige, a collective place in the "universal" history of culture.

*Ariel* proposed a new relation between "culture" and the State, mediated by national institutions of education: aesthetic humanism. This alliance would be appropriated and reformulated many times, in many Spanish American countries, during the next thirty years. In what follows, by *arielismo* I refer to a cultural trend maintained – from *circa* 1900, *Ariel's*



publication date, to the 1940s – by a number of Spanish America public intellectuals, not always coordinated among themselves, or coordinated only at the level of correspondence, prologues, reviews, and shared acquaintances. The trend can be broadly defined as a defense and promotion of the kind of alliance between “high” culture and state-funded education that José Enrique Rodó formulated in *Ariel*. I consider among the most notable *arielistas* such intellectuals as Dominican Pedro Henríquez Ureña (1884-1946), Mexicans Alfonso Reyes (1889-1959) and José Vasconcelos (1882-1959), Chilean Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957) and Peruvian brothers Francisco (1883-1953) and Ventura García-Calderón (1886-1959). In Mexico, the Ateneo de la Juventud, a group of young intellectuals which included Reyes, Henríquez Ureña and Vasconcelos, enacted the *arielista* thrust.

Given its position between national institutions of education and the “free world of letters” (as Alfonso Reyes would later write), henceforth I understand *arielismo* in a two-fold manner: as an educational ideology and as a literary language. In the first case, *arielismo* begs the consideration of schools’ aesthetic function as the site where national youth is invested and capitalized, with consequences that far outreach literary production:

Es en la escuela, por cuyas manos procuramos que pase la dura arcilla de la muchedumbre, donde está la primera y más generosa manifestación de la equidad social, que consagra para todos la accesibilidad del saber y de los medios más eficaces de superioridad. Ella debe complementar tan noble cometido, hacienda objetos de una educación preferente y cuidadosa el sentido del orden, la idea y la voluntad de la justicia, el sentimiento de las legítimas autoridades morales<sup>96</sup>

Hence, *arielismo*’s aesthetic humanism implied a kind of political economy for the production of subjects at national schools; it describes a circuit of investment and production, with its forms of capital, labor, profit and waste. In turn, it guarantees “el ordenado concierto de la existencia

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<sup>96</sup> Rodó, *Ariel*, 188.

colectiva” by articulating the relations between “educated” subjects and the positions they occupy within the social division of labor, an articulation that, in this case, happens through culture and the arts. Therefore, aesthetic humanism functions as a particular modality of the school as an ‘ideological apparatus,’ to use Althusser’s term.<sup>97</sup> *Arielismo* as educational ideology has had a great impact on the education policy in Spanish America, something I try to show by examining its impact in the Mexican case.

In a second sense, I understand *arielismo* to be a particular form of *literary language* informed by schools’ task of symbolic reproduction. It was this task which prompted Prospero’s real-life disciples to produce a literary language that wanted to become a new “habla común.” In this sense, *arielismo*’s language was a defense of poetry’s general, un-specialized character, against the impulse towards absolute singularity imposed by the market. Thus, I take *arielismo* as a case study in the relations between language and subject formation, a relation mediated by national institutions of education. As a particular kind of literary language institutionally related to schools, *arielismo* also provides the opportunity to explore the tense relations between a humanist conception of literature and the “espíritu de especialización,” to use Próspero’s own terms, which structures modern institutions of education. These tensions are registered in *arielismo*’s literary language itself, which both embraces and rejects its own specialization. Thus, I take *arielismo* to signify a specific moment in the history of Spanish American modern literary

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<sup>97</sup> The general thrust of Althusser’s argument is well-known: that the reproduction of the relations of production in every social formation depends on two kinds of institutional “apparatuses,” the “repressive” and the “ideological.” The first guarantee the reproduction of social relations through coercion or force, the second through “ideology” – institutionally located practices of social “recognition.” Althusser famously characterized the process of ideological recognition through the metaphor of ‘hailing’ (*interpellar*): the simultaneous movement of an institutionally sanctioned *voice* that enunciates its subject and of a subject that recognizes itself (and thus sanctions) the *voice* that enunciates it. See *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*.

language, a moment which registers in its own linguistic specificity the emergence of both a liberal market and modern national systems of education.

Finally, this working definition of *arielismo* as both a school ideology and a literary language (dimensions which are interrelated) sets up a general framework of critical problems, with which the various *arielistas* wrestled in different measures. All of these critical problems are derived from the arielist alliance between literature and modern institutions of education: the relations between literary language and subject making; the distinction between literature as either a general or a specialized activity; the relations between oral and written communication; the links between distinct kind of ‘goods’ (the spiritual and the positive); the difference between kinds of labor; and the distinction between the different kinds of capital needed to produce and consume them: worktime and leisure-time. The two figures I study next – Alfonso Reyes and José Vasconcelos – will engage these critical problems in their own original ways.

CHAPTER II. AESTHETIC MATTERS: HUMANISM, LITERARY LANGUAGE AND THE  
PROFESSIONALIZATION OF CULTURE IN ALFONSO REYES'S *CUESTIONES  
ESTÉTICAS*

“La verdad es que nos faltan ideas generales sobre nuestra literatura. Si las tuviéramos, tendríamos también buenos manuales de literatura y podríamos, además, prescindir de ellos.”

Antonio Machado, *Juan de Mairena. Sentencias, donaires, apuntes y recuerdos de un profesor apócrifo*

*I. On Spiritual Communities, or A Small Mexican Academy*

Like José Enrique Rodó's *Ariel*, Alfonso Reyes's first collection of prose, *Cuestiones estéticas*, was written and published under dramatic circumstances. Its earliest text dates from 1908 – a comparative analysis of Electra's figure in classical Greek theater, “Las tres *Electras* del teatro ateniense.” Reyes was then nineteen years old, studying his first year of Law at the Escuela de Derecho (the place to be if you wanted to become an intellectual) and already fully immersed in the cultural battles of the moment, concerned with the regeneration of the Escuela Preparatoria Nacional and the National University. The collection's latest text – “De los proverbios y sentencias vulgares” – is dated June 1910, merely six months before Francisco Madero's declaration of insurrection set off the events that would include, in 1913, the death of Alfonso's own father, general Bernardo Reyes. It was Alfonso himself who, years later, made explicit the interrelation between political and cultural revolutions, a view that is still one of the established truths of Mexican cultural and intellectual history.<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, the publication of *Cuestiones estéticas* in 1911 should be as momentous as the armed revolt itself, and certainly no less dramatic.

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<sup>1</sup> For the standard interpretations of the Ateneo's role in Mexican culture and politics, see Leopoldo Zea, *El positivismo en México* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1943); Fernando Curiel, *La revuelta: interpretación del Ateneo de la Juventud (1906-1929)* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1998) and *Ateneo de la Juventud (A-Z)* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2001); Susana Quintanilla, *Nosotros: la juventud del Ateneo de México* (Mexico City: Tusquets, 2008); Pedro Ángel Palou, “The Ateneo de la Juventud: The Foundations of Mexican Intellectual Culture,” in *A History of Mexican Literature*, ed. Ignacio Sánchez Prado, Anna

It is then a wonder, and something to be looked into, that Reyes's *Cuestiones estéticas* (CS) is often overlooked in the critical discussions about the Ateneo de la Juventud and the role it played before, during and after 1910. It is thought, perhaps, that this is the work of a student who had just graduated from the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria in 1907, an extraordinarily precocious young man, but not yet the true intellectual he would become, not yet *Alfonso Reyes* – José Luis Martínez calls it “el primer libro de su mocedad, revelador de su talento.”<sup>2</sup> Or it could be that the collection is still too much a part of the Porfirian world it wanted to break away from, still too close to that which it was trying to push away. This surely is not the Reyes of *Visión de Anáhuac* (1917) and of the search for the “national soul,” although some of *that* Reyes can already be found in CS. It contains essays on the poetry of Luis de Góngora, Goethe and Stéphane Mallarmé; ancient Greek tragedy; Diego de San Pedro and the origins of the Spanish novel; Augusto de Armas; Bernard Shaw; popular sayings and popular culture. It even contains an ironic condemnation of novels that use national festivities as literary material - “La noche del 15 de septiembre y la novelística nacional” -, which in the 1955 edition of Reyes's *Obras completas* sadly wears a note at its end in which he tries to attenuate these “extremos y desenfados juveniles.” But this is the only time he corrects his younger self. In *Historia documental de mis libros*, also from 1955, Reyes wrote about *Cuestiones estéticas*: “En cuanto al contenido del libro, varias veces he declarado que yo suscribiría todas las opiniones allí expuestas, o ‘prácticamente todas’ como suele decirse. Hay conceptos, temas de *Cuestiones estéticas* derramados por todas mis obras posteriores [...] Mis

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M. Nogar and José Ramón Ruisánchez Serra (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); See also Enrique Krauze, “La genealogía intelectual,” in *Caudillos culturales en la Revolución Mexicana* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> José Luis Martínez, “Las memorias de Alfonso Reyes,” *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* 37, no. 2 (1989): 497-504.

aficiones, mis puntos de vista, son los mismos.”<sup>3</sup> When looking at this work of youth the only temptation was to correct style, Reyes significantly wrote in the preface to the *Obras completas*.

Although its texts were publicly read or individually published in Mexico City during these years, *Cuestiones estéticas* was actually printed in Paris through the *Sociedad de Ediciones Literarias y Artísticas*, part of Paul Ollendorf’s publishing house.<sup>4</sup> This was made possible through the mediation of several key figures in Spanish America’s intellectual life at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. First amongst these was the wandering Dominican, Pedro Henríquez Ureña. Mentor and close friend to Reyes, Henríquez Ureña had only published a new collection of essays – *Horas de estudio*, the result of his first years in Mexico City after arriving there in 1906 – through the Parisian publishing house, where another Dominican exile, Lucas Tomás Gibbes, was in charge of works in Spanish. Both Henríquez Ureña and Gibbes had been close disciples of Puerto Rican pedagogue Eugenio María de Hostos in the Dominican Republic.<sup>5</sup> Also living in Paris at the time, as diplomats, were Peruvian brothers Francisco and Ventura García-Calderón; the former had published *Profesores de idealismos* in 1909 and the latter *Del romanticismo al modernismo: poetas y prosistas peruanos* in 1910, through the same publishing house. Francisco, the elder, corresponded with Henríquez Ureña and through him knew of Reyes and *Cuestiones estéticas*, to

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<sup>3</sup> Alfonso Reyes, “Historia documental de mis libros,” *Obras completas XXIV* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990), 158-159.

<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of the 20th century, two French houses – *Garnier Frères* and *Editions Bouret* – held a large part of the publishing market in Spanish. Jean-Francois Botrel quotes a contemporary commentator: “En París, Garnier se gloria en ganar con sus libros en Castellano más que todos los editores de Madrid juntos,” “...la viuda Bouret, que tiene casi monopolizado el mercado de Méjico...en el año 1913 envió libros en castellano por valor de más de 500 000 francos.” Alongside these two major houses, there existed other minor enterprises such as *Librería Paul Ollendorff*. See *La <<Sociedad de Ediciones Literarias y Artísticas – Librería Paul Ollendorff>> Contribution à l’étude de l’édition en langue espagnole, à Paris, au début du vingtième siècle* (Talence: Institut d’Etudes ibériques de l’Université de Bordeaux, 1970). See also Jean-Claude Villegas, *La littérature hispano-américaine publiée en France 1900-1984* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, 1986) and Sylvia Molloy, *La diffusion de la littérature hispano-américaine en France au XXe siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972).

<sup>5</sup> See Amadeo Julián, “Pedro Henríquez Ureña, Lucas Thomas Gibbes y la primera edición de *Horas de estudio*,” *Cuadernos Americanos* 4, no. 174 (2020): 11-30.

which he wrote a “spontaneous” prologue and which he officially sponsored (“apadrinar la obra,” in Reyes own words) within the cultural circles of Latin American diplomats, artists and exiles in Paris at the beginning of the century. Almost thirty years later, Reyes famously wrote of Henríquez Ureña that “no hay entre nosotros ejemplo de comunidad y entusiasmo espirituales como los que él provocó.”<sup>6</sup> This spiritual community was sustained through a very material circuit of international cultural exchange: personal and business correspondence, prologues, reviews, sponsors, shared professors, publications and the rest.<sup>7</sup>

This circuit of cultural production and exchange took as its literary emblem José Enrique Rodó’s *Ariel*. Indeed, the necessity of such circuits and links was one of the tasks the Uruguayan master bequeathed unto his disciples. In a society of specialized knowledges and growing complexity in the division of labor, Prospero feared that communication and recognition between individuals (and with it the possibility of producing a national culture strong enough to stand against the forces of materialism, sublimated in the monstrous figure of the United States) would become impossible: “...el peligro de preparar espíritus estrechos que, incapaces de considerar más que el único aspecto de la realidad con que estén inmediatamente en contacto, vivirán separados por helados desiertos...”<sup>8</sup> In Prospero’s lecture, it was the function of high culture, distributed through schools, to provide the common ground for communication between professions, and between professionals and technical workers. Quoting Schiller, he asserted that in modern society

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<sup>6</sup> Alfonso Reyes, “Pasado inmediato,” *Obras completas XII* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1960), 205.

<sup>7</sup> According to Robert Conn’s formulation, in these early texts Reyes “performs” intellectual community, where “performance” denotes their “contingent” character, the fact that these communities come into existence at the moment of being named and not before. See *The Politics of Philology: Alfonso Reyes Invention of the Latin-American Literary Tradition* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2002). Essaying a less discursive approach, Gerard Aching traces the circuit of letters and recommendations between Rodó and his Spanish correspondents – Clarín, the most important one – after the publication of *Ariel*, in an effort to explain the text’s success at becoming emblematic both in Spain and Spanish America. See *The Politics of Spanish American Modernism: by Exquisite Design* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> José Enrique Rodó, *Ariel*, ed. Pablo Rocca (Montevideo: Biblioteca de rescate Renacimiento, 2020), 10.

only art is able to produce a *universal interest*, where universality meant the mundane fact that art can be enjoyed by doctors as well as lawyers and engineers. Thus, there is a sense in which Prospero's discourse is not aristocratic at all (one of the most common accusations against Rodó) but quite pedestrian: high culture is but *general* culture, symbolic capital distributed by schools with the intention of providing a common background out of which professional and scientific specialization could develop in harmony. In his prologue to *Cuestiones estéticas*, Francisco García Calderón described Alfonso Reyes as a "paladín del 'arielismo' en América" and the Ateneo de la Juventud as a group "...cuyas aficiones de noble idealismo se armonizan, dentro de la más rica variedad de especialidades científicas."<sup>9</sup>

It is worthwhile to dwell on García Calderón's "spontaneous" prologue. While it partially served as an introduction in the conventional sense, anticipating the book's content through a review of Reyes's erudition and filiations, its main preoccupation was not with the author himself but with describing a particular model of group-formation. The overcoming of professional and scientific specialization is described by García Calderón through a Platonic model: "Pertenece Alfonso Reyes a un simpático grupo de escritores, pequeña academia mexicana, de libres discusiones platónicas [...] Pedro Henríquez Ureña, hijo de Salomé Ureña, la admirable poetisa dominicana, es el Sócrates de este grupo fraternal"; "Conocen la Grecia artística y filosófica, y algo del espíritu platónico llega a la antigua ciudad colonial donde un grupo ardiente escucha la música de ideales esferas y desempeña un magisterio armonioso."<sup>10</sup> Much has been written on Reyes's humanism, of which we shall speak later.<sup>11</sup> For now, it is only important to notice that

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<sup>9</sup> Francisco García Calderón, prologue to "Cuestiones estéticas," in *Obras completas I* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1955), 12.

<sup>10</sup> García Calderón, 11-12.

<sup>11</sup> I have chosen to write of Reyes's "Humanism" – rather than his "Hellenism" or "Classicism" – to emphasize the presence of Italian and Spanish Humanism in his approach to the "classics," that is, to highlight its pedagogic dimension.



García Calderón's recourse to classical antiquity in the form of the Platonic dialogue invokes here a particular kind of pedagogic situation – a magistrery capable of “harmonizing” the “many varieties of scientific specialization,” a harmony that yields its fruit in the form of cultural production. For García Calderón, *Cuestiones estéticas* was not simply the result of Reyes's individual effort, but the product of this “small academy,” which was materialized through the publication of the book itself and made explicit through its prologue.

The *arielistas'* concern with group-formation was dramatized by Reyes himself in what is perhaps *Cuestiones estéticas* most complex piece, entitled “Tres diálogos.” It is not surprising that the only text in the collection not written in the form of a lecture/essay is a humanist dialogue. Indeed, Roberto González Echeverría surmised that *Ariel's* magisterial monologue was modeled on certain Platonic texts, a relation that was first noted by German philologist Max Leopold Wagner.<sup>12</sup> Reyes's “Tres diálogos” stages a three-day conversation between two young students, Valdés (perhaps a reference to Juan de Valdés and the *Diálogo de la lengua*) and Castro. The dialogue takes place in the latter's household and consists of three different scenes: “El demonio de la biblioteca,” “El duende de la casa” and “Las cigarras del jardín.” During these three days, Valdés, who is a former playwright, assumes the Socratic role; Castro, an aspiring poet, that of the disciple or “catecúmeno.” The subject they discuss is simple: to write or not to write. For the greater part of the three days, however, Socrates is not the beneficial figure drawn in García-Calderón's prologue. Rather than representing what Reyes himself later described as “la influencia socrática de Henríquez Ureña,” which taught “a oír, a ver, a pensar, y suscitaba una verdadera

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<sup>12</sup> Roberto González Echeverría, “The case of the speaking statue” in *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985). See Max Leopold Wagner, *Die spanisch-amerikanische literatur in Ihren Hauptströmungen* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1924), p. 53. I thank Mauricio Tenorio for this last reference.

reforma en la cultura,” Socrates/Valdés is represented in “Tres diálogos” as a figure of diseased and sterile self-analysis. In the dialogues climax, Castro formulates the accusation in the following manner: “Nunca te había yo visto entregado a tales orgías; entregado, cínicamente, a la sensualidad socrática de meterte en el alma ajena.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, the picture of harmonious magistry drawn in classical fashion in García Calderón’s prologue is disturbed by *Cuestiones estéticas* own rendition of the pedagogic scene. Reyes’s Socrates does not lead to birth but to despair and is less a midwife than (the anachronism is less spectacular than it appears) a modern-day critical theorist.

This, of course, is not to suggest that “Tres diálogos” ought to be read merely as a historical commentary on the Ateneo de la Juventud, still less as a critique *à clef* of Henriquez Ureña’s role as its magisterial voice. As Carlos Monsiváis noticed some time ago: “Como muchos otros proyectos intelectuales del siglo, de Bloomsbury a *Contemporáneos*, de *Sur* a *Orígenes*, el del Ateneo exalta el “banquete platónico” como el paradigma del diálogo...”<sup>14</sup> As I will try to show, “Tres diálogos” may be read as the critique (in the sense of dispelling errors *and* defining its positive conditions of possibility) of this particular model of group-formation. In so far as essays at group-formation imagine themselves in the form of Platonic dialogues (a performance that points much farther back than the “intellectual projects of the century” mentioned by Monsiváis), they ultimately imply a *pedagogic* structure – the existence of the group depends on a successful circuit of *communication* and *recognition* between “teacher” or “master” (Socrates) and disciples. The central questions around which Reyes’s dialogue revolves is, indeed, whether such circuits - dialogue itself - are possible: “¡Qué imprecisión! ¡Ya ves que así [...] no te comunicaría yo mi pensamiento, sino que solamente movería el tuyo!” Thus, what is at stake in the matter of Valdés

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<sup>13</sup> Alfonso Reyes, “Cuestiones estéticas,” *Obras completas I* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1955), 131.

<sup>14</sup> Carlos Monsiváis, “La toma de partido de Alfonso Reyes,” *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* 37, no. 2 (1989): 508-509.

and Castro's *communication* is: 1) the possibility of constituting the "spiritual community," and 2) the eventual success of the Ateneo's pedagogic and civilizing project – *communication* as the condition for *education*. Many of the essays in *Cuestiones estéticas* were indeed read as part of a series of public lectures through which the members of the Ateneo wished to "instruct" and "form" the national public. In this last sense, "Tres diálogos" seems to hold a privileged position in the collection, working both as a synthesis of the ideas expressed in the other pieces and as a kind of *meta*-commentary on the dynamics of intellectual exchange and group-formation that make the circulation and acceptance of such ideas possible. By the end of the dialogue the two interlocutors transform each other and, in their reconciliation, enact what Reyes considers a successful circuit of communication and thus of group formation.

The recourse to the classical dialogue thus takes us back to the social circumstances in which *Cuestiones estéticas* was published: the humanist reform of the Escuela Preparatoria Nacional and the National University.<sup>15</sup> The project to establish a classic magistrery in the *polis* implied the harmonizing of, in García Calderón's words, "la más rica variedad de especialidades científicas." For Reyes, who always considered himself fundamentally a poet, this institutional function was above all a matter of the languages produced and distributed by institutions of higher education: against the Babel of specialization, "literature" was meant to produce and distribute a *general* language.<sup>16</sup> Thus, only *literary language* could offer the conditions for the Platonic

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<sup>15</sup> *Ariel* itself was written and published during a prolonged and intense cultural battle for the hegemony of Montevideo's National University, a fact often eclipsed by the more spectacular context of 1898 and the Spanish American war. See Arturo Ardao, *Espiritualismo y positivismo en el Uruguay* (Montevideo: Universidad de la República, Departamento de Publicaciones, 1969); Juan Antonio Odone, *La universidad uruguaya del militarismo a la crisis* (Montevideo: Universidad de la República, Departamento de Publicaciones, 1971); Jorge Bralich, *José Pedro Varela: sociedad burguesa y reforma educacional* (Montevideo: Ediciones del Nuevo Mundo, 1989) and *Una historia de la educación en el Uruguay* (Montevideo: Fundación de Cultura Universitaria, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> I use the term 'general' rather than 'national' precisely in order to emphasize the overcoming of specialized languages implied in the production of this literary language.

symposium. And yet, by the mere fact that it had been assigned a precise function within institutions of higher education, “literature” itself had to conform to professional specialization. I surmise that these unresolved institutional tensions can be read in “Tres diálogos” and the whole of *Cuestiones estéticas*. Thus, I offer here a symptomatic reading of the collection. That is, I surmise that Reyes’s ideas on aesthetics are less an answer to any purely “ideal” concerns than to questions posed by the professionalization of “literature” at the higher levels of the educational system.<sup>17</sup> The symptoms of professionalization may be read in Reyes’s own critical prose, which García Calderón qualified as “artística y a la vez delicada y armoniosa. Ni lenta, como en sabios comentadores, ni nerviosa, como en el arte del periodista.” This might, indeed, be the ideal towards which Reyes aspired. What I’ll try to show, however, is that *Cuestiones estéticas*’ critical prose might best be considered as the ground on which two linguistic impulses – the ‘scholastic’ pulling towards specialization and the ‘literary’ pulling towards the *general* – play out their respective social forces. This linguistic drama between the ‘scholastic’ and the ‘literary,’ as it were, is no mere reflection of Reyes’s and the Ateneo’s institutional circumstances – it is the event itself, the ambiguous moment of contact between the language of the academy and the language of the poets implied by the professionalization of literature.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ignacio Sánchez Prado writes of *Cuestiones estéticas* “idealism” in the sense of the collection being marked by “la preocupación hegeliana por la relación entre la lengua y el espíritu.” See “El ‘culto a Mallarmé’ de Alfonso Reyes: la poesía moderna y la lengua de la Polis,” in *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 39, no. 78 (2013): 11-29.

<sup>18</sup> This ambivalent position helps explain the fact that two conflicting images of Reyes and the Ateneo coexist in Mexican literary criticism. On the one hand, as Carlos Monsiváis rightly noticed: “El Ateneo de la Juventud encauzó su crítica dentro del orden, y su gran innovación fue la exigencia de rigor, no la resistencia al poder.” See “La toma...,” 510. Equally, Gonzalo Celorio situates the emergence of his own vocation as a “professional reader” in a reading of Reyes’s *El deslinde*: “La lectura de *El deslinde* de Alfonso Reyes es un tropiezo primerizo con la lucidez [...] A partir de su lectura, el joven poeta dejó de leer despatarrado en la cama; empezó a leer sentado al escritorio, con el lápiz presto, alternando el cuaderno de notas con el libro y volviendo cursivas las redondas: los subrayados son suyos.” See “Periferia de Alfonso Reyes,” *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* 37, no. 2 (1989): 36. A different image, however, is already suggested by Susana Quintanilla when she writes that “[s]i, según se afirma, cada generación se define a sí misma por sus formas de leer a los clásicos, ésta se caracterizó por la ausencia de métodos establecidos, llámense academia, tradición o filología, para acercarse interiormente a la antigüedad y sentir lo que ella era para el hombre moderno. La pasión substituyó la impericia y donde faltó conocimiento hubo intuición.” See “Dionisio en México o cómo leyeron nuestros clásicos a los clásicos griegos,” *Historia Mexicana* 51, no. 3 (2002): 640. Antonio Alatorre

Thus, an approach to *Cuestiones estéticas* as an original agent in the material and immaterial circuits we have called *arielismo* must begin by examining this strange, three-day dialogue between two students, a frustrated playwright turned ironist and a young poet who struggles for reasons to write. Taking these dialogues as our center, it will be possible to make our way through many of the collection's pieces in a manner not unlike Valdés's and Castro's own slippery conversation. My take will contribute, I hope, to understand Reyes's *Cuestiones estéticas* as an original examination of the (many times contradictory) principles that guided the Ateneo's essay at group-formation; that the Ateneo itself was part of a wide and international cultural/pedagogic reform that began in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, of which José Enrique Rodó's *Ariel* was also part; and that, in Mexico as in many other countries striving for liberal modernity at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, aesthetics was intricately linked to the place and function of art in institutions of basic and higher education.

## *II. The Library: Decadence, School Language and Aesthetic Expression*

In "El demonio de la biblioteca," we find the two friends sitting silently in Castro's domestic library. Without knowing it, the reader is already witnessing a pedagogical scene: the aspiring poet Castro invited Valdés to watch him work on a poem, in order to dissuade him from a life of idleness. It is Valdés who informs us of the situation when, incapable of sitting in silence and at the request of his "demonio interior," he initiates the conversation. This is the dialogues' first reference to its Platonic models and situates Valdés in the position of Socrates, even though the situation itself might have pointed to Castro as the teacher figure. While Castro was working or

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reformulates this view, not without some bad faith: "Lo que muchas veces me veo obligado a decir es que a mí don Alfonso nunca me dio la impresión de ser un 'sabio' en el sentido en que suele entenderse esta palabra. Fue un *amateur*: un hombre siempre ganoso de saber; aficionado a la sabiduría; no un *sophós*, sino un *philosophos*, para decirlo en griego." See "Pequeña crónica desmitificante," *Diálogos: Artes, Letras, Ciencias humanas* 10, no. 4 (1974), 22.

trying to work, Valdés was unable to concentrate and lost himself contemplating the library's books. He describes the inability to concentrate as a process of depersonalization, a dissolution of the self:

...cansado de la monotonía de tus gestos, volví la vista a tus libros y a tus estantes y, paseándola por todos los títulos, fui, en síntesis, recordando todos los asuntos – que yo también he leído ya los libros todos. Y ¿qué traje de mi imaginado paseo? ¿Consejos de laboriosidad? ¿Alientos y estímulos? No, sino una completa impresión de vaciedad. Quedóseme el ánimo vacío, porque yo iba como prendiendo a cada libro las emociones que solicitaba de mí y —consecuencia de mi esterilidad incurable— en vez de que algo naciera en mí de súbito, como una reacción, quedó mi espíritu desplegado, como tenue velo flotante, esparcido por el espacio de tu biblioteca, y yo me sentí disuelto, disgregado, *despersonalizado*; tanto, que para cobrar mi conciencia y *encontrarme* de nuevo, torné a mirarte, pues de seguro la chocante imagen del *hombre-que-trabaja* habría de hacerme reaccionar, como sucedió en efecto, plegando hasta mí el esparcido enjambre de mis pensamientos alados [...] ¿Qué has ganado? ¿Qué he ganado? Nada, sino aumentar instantes de ocio a los muchos que ya cuento en mi vida.”<sup>19</sup>

Valdés's opening statement describes already the dialogues' general outline. Its point of departure is the modernist *topos* of sterility and idleness, a subject which will be further elaborated at a later point in this essay. Indeed, if Valdés assumes here the position of Socrates, his figure is immediately related to barrenness (“incurable sterility,” “instead of something being born within me”) rather than Socratic midwifery. The point of arrival is the pure consciousness of *homo faber*, at which the “swarm of feathered thoughts” might be gathered. The movement from one to the other can be said to constitute the main preoccupation in “Tres diálogos” and in the totality of *Cuestiones estéticas*.

In “El demonio en la biblioteca,” Valdés argues that the modernist pathos of decay and its ethos of idleness were the result of a particular historical process: the decadence of institutions of higher education during the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. It is a bookish decadence, implied by Mallarmé's famous verse on having read everything there is to read. For the younger generation

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<sup>19</sup> Reyes, “Cuestiones estéticas,” 193. Italics always in the original.

of aspiring Mexican intellectuals to which Reyes belonged, this process came to be associated with the positivistic curriculum at the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria and the lack of a house of higher studies for the humanistic disciplines, such as the State had facilitated for the study of Law, Medicine and Engineering. Although there was much truth in this accusation, it must also be said that there are important continuities between the Ateneo and the previous generation of *positivistas*, especially with Gabino Barreda's disciples. In his 1867 *Oración cívica* - read during one of the national festivities of independence Reyes later mocked - Barreda argued against those who believed the essential task of the school was the production of professionals and workers. The true function of the school, and the concrete reason why the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria was created, was the distribution of "un fondo común de verdades" which could harmonize the self-interests pursued through technical work or a professional degree. In Barreda's terms, it was not enough to produce workers but to create *citizens*. As can be seen, this same functional ideology of the school was shared by Reyes and the Ateneo - the regeneration of the Nacional Preparatoria is preached on the same terms Barreda used to argue for its creation in 1867. The particular distinction within this larger ideological definition of the school was, of course, that Barreda and his disciples thought only scientific knowledge could provide the universal ground of truth on which to harmonize professional self-interest.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Gabino Barreda, *Ley orgánica de Instrucción Pública en el Distrito Federal/Oración Cívica* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1967). On the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, see Clementina Díaz y de Ovando, *La Escuela Nacional Preparatoria* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1972). On the history of higher education: George I. Sánchez, *The Development of Higher Education in Mexico* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1944); Francisco Larroyo, *Historia comparada de la educación en México* (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1947); Josefina Zoraida Vázquez, *Nacionalismo y educación en México* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1975); Martha Robles, *Educación y sociedad en la historia de México* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1977); *Historia de la Educación Pública en México*, ed. Fernando Solana, Raúl Cardiel Reyes, Raul Bolaños (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982); Mílada Bazant, *Historia de la educación durante el porfiriato* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1993); Mílada Bazant, "La educación moderna: 1867-1911," in *Historia de la educación en la Ciudad de México*, ed. Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, Anne Staples (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación del Distrito Federal, 2012).

Despite their fundamental differences regarding curriculum, Barreda and the Ateneo were both exponents of a particular school ideology which asserted it was the right of state-funded education to provide its subjects with a *general* culture. As Leopoldo Zea showed in his classic discussion of Mexican positivism, Barreda's project for the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria was attacked first by an older generation of liberals who, fully committed to the ideal of *libertad de consciencia*, accused Barreda of preaching a new creed under the guise of distributing "un fondo común de verdades," an accusation that was undeniably true; later by a group within Mexican positivism with close ties to the newspapers and the (also state-funded) "public sphere." These two sides argued for a more restricted conception of public education: basic mathematics, national history and Spanish language at the elementary level and just enough "preparatory" education for technical schools or the three *facultades*. In a country where the average lifespan was thirty-five years of age, one critic wrote in *El País*, five years at the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria were ludicrous: if a student received his professional or technical degree at twenty-four, he would have a bit over ten years to work, procreate and become a *valuable* member of society. Another conservative commonplace regarding the influence of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria was that it led youth to depression, anxiety and, possibly, suicide. A *general* culture in the form of shared scientific truths could not avail students with the spiritual and moral certitudes necessary for work and family life. That task, it was maintained, belonged exclusively and legitimately to the family. Ironically, in this sense the older Jacobins, the younger Positivists and the most conservative Catholics were in fundamental agreement against Barreda's education ideology.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Zea, *El positivismo*, 122-147 and 191-219. The relationship in Barreda's school ideology between "un fondo común de verdades" and the problem of communication is also remarked upon by Zea: "...este tipo de educación es considerado por Barreda como indispensable para establecer las bases del orden social, pues del hecho de que todos los estudiantes alcancen un conocimiento semejante en todas las ciencias resultará la unidad de pensamiento, y con ésta, su capacidad para entenderse unos con otros independientemente de la diversidad de sus profesiones o quehaceres" (138); "...el aumento de las *escuelas especiales*, es considerada por Barreda como continuación de los



Barreda provided educational institutions with a level of self-consciousness previously lacking in secular, state-funded education. That is, he considered the school as a particular political actor, with its own interests and its own field of jurisdiction. The school was not merely a so-called state-mechanism but could itself provide an image for the state, a model of unity within diversity. It is not, then, that Barreda simply formulated one school ideology amongst many, but that he provided a level of abstraction derived from the concrete institutional possibilities of the school within the emerging liberal state in Mexico. The Ateneo's members are very much disciples of Barreda and part of a long struggle for the autonomy of higher studies, which would be formally granted by the Mexican state in 1929. The concrete shift that the Ateneo effected from a *scientific* to a *humanistic* model of *general* culture had two strategic dimensions. It meant, of course, the change to a curriculum in which the humanities and the liberal arts occupy the functional role previously played by science. But, more importantly, it was the realization that the *general* culture distributed by schools was above all a *particular* language - a mode of reading and writing, speaking and arguing, conversing, essaying ideas and arriving at conclusions. For the Ateneo, the decadence of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria was evident from the particular school-language it spread amongst its students. This decadence was caused by the proximity between the notions of 'rhetoric' and 'literature' within the school's curricula. During the five or six years a student spent at the Nacional Preparatoria, only the last was dedicated to the study of literature, while the rest involved the theory and practice of national oratory.<sup>22</sup> For a new generation of young artists and intellectuals, this fact explained the perceived lack of great cultural works produced in México

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ataques enderezados hacia el orden, puesto que establecer escuelas de especialización es fomentar el desacuerdo entre los mexicanos, haciendo que cada mexicano no entienda sino de aquello en lo cual se ha especializado" (139).

<sup>22</sup> See María de Lourdes Velázquez Albo, *Origen y desarrollo del plan de estudios del bachillerato universitario 1867-1990* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1992).

during the last three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, as well as of rigorous and inventive cultural critique.

While awaiting its positive formulation, the aesthetic doctrine contained in *Cuestiones estéticas* can be negatively defined as an effort to transcend the scholarly language spread by national institutions of higher education. In “El demonio de la biblioteca,” Valdés’s main accusation against Castro and his fellow poets is that they are *escolásticos*: “...procedéis por deducciones, por *sorites* interminables: sois escolásticos. Llenáis vuestros estilos de formulas de lógica. ¡Y todo es manía de desarrollo! ¿Cómo la llaman en latín? ¡*Facundia*, es verdad, *Facundia*! Y bien: la *facundia* y la *escolástica* os han perdido. A vosotros particularmente, los que escribís en castellano.”<sup>23</sup> This degraded language has its site of production and distribution in the institutes of higher education, through both concrete curricular choices and the professors’ oratory style: “Los autores que desarrollan mucho son insoportables y hacen torpes a los lectores; por tal razón, debiera prohibirse en nuestros institutos de enseñanza la lectura de Spencer, que tan lamentables efectos produce en las mentes juveniles. Los mismos profesores deberían perorar menos: si fuere posible, que hablasen como los antiguos oráculos, es decir, por títulos.”<sup>24</sup> And, while positivistic ideology certainly carries much of the blame for this state of affairs, Valdés’s offers also a larger historical argument regarding the relations between scholasticism and institutions of education in early-modern Spain. Valdés’s concludes:

...que la tendencia al desarrollo ha inficionado la prosa con deducciones, distingos, rectificaciones, paradojas, antítesis, y una infinidad de fórmulas que provisionalmente llamo escolásticas; por lo cual, ha padecido particularmente el estilo castellano cuyo apogeo es hijo de la educación escolástica. La cual, después de su florecimiento y bajo los ataques de Raimundo Lull y de Luis Vives, perduró en la enseñanza y saturó todas las mentes, y de aquí que el estilo castellano se haya llenado de barreras y estorbos, de

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<sup>23</sup> Reyes, “Cuestiones estéticas,” 121.

<sup>24</sup> Reyes, 121-122.

*relativos, de condicionales, que turban la transparencia de los párrafos y su impulso lírico y amplio...*<sup>25</sup>

In this argument, scholasticism saturates, obstructs, hinders - it suppresses language's free play of desire, its "broad and lyric impulse." The aesthetic comes to signify for Valdés a release from the language of schools, not a mere distinction but a kind of libidinal consummation, a streaming forth of desire over the linguistic formulas acquired at national institutions of higher education. And, as the last passage makes clear, it is not only Castro and the poets who are in need of a new language but Valdés himself, as his argument is full of the scholastic formulas it is meant to critique: "inficionado" instead of "infectado," "por lo cual," "la cual," "de aquí que," etc.

In his argument, Valdés condemns writers who over-elaborate their themes and professors who are too discursive in their lessons. He suggests taking an example from classical oracles and speaking only in *titles*. Indeed, Valdés confesses that the afternoon has not been a complete waste, for while lost in the contemplation of Castro's books he thought of a suggestive and original title: *Molestias del trato de poetas*. The title, he explains to Castro, is the antithesis of discursive development, a perfect sequence of words that admit no variation: "Lo que yo entiendo por *título* es, no lo que comúnmente se entiende, sino toda frase o proposición insustituible, "insuprimible", que envuelve y compendia en sí todo lo que el llamado desarrollo no hace sino diluir o repetir de modo pleonástico."<sup>26</sup> Valdés gives other examples, one of which I find particularly beautiful: *De la influencia de las colas de los peces en las ondulaciones del mar*, the title from a treatise by romantic French composer Ernest Reyer. Rather than exhausting its subject, the title seeks to exercise the student's mental gymnastics by way of suggestions. Here, of course, Valdés is but reversing the popular classroom practice of developing a theme, in which the professor would give

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<sup>25</sup> Reyes, 125.

<sup>26</sup> Reyes, 123.

students a general subject to expound either orally or in writing. Rather than making students develop themes, they should become accustomed to discerning and producing titles. And, as we shall now see, Valdés theory of titles – “any irreplaceable phrase or proposition” – is also a theory of verse, poetic composition and the poetic experience.

In dialogic manner, Castro is quick to attack Valdés’s position. His main counterargument: the impossibility of communication within Valdés’s theoretical system: “¡Qué imprecisión! ¡Ya ves que así, con mis *títulos*, no te comunicaría yo mi pensamiento, sino que solamente movería el tuyo!”<sup>27</sup> This is a conclusion that Valdés happily and cynically accepts. Here, however, we might do well to briefly abandon our protagonists’ conversation and pay attention to one of the most substantial essays in *Cuestiones estéticas*: “Sobre el procedimiento ideológico de Stéphane Mallarmé,” Reyes’s meditations on Mallarmé’s poetic theory and praxis. For the contradiction between poetic expression and communication is indeed the central issue of the piece.

In *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953), M. H. Abrams defined the Romantic paradigm of art as “expression” through a quote from Wordsworth’s preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798): “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” In Abrams terms, “[p]oetry is the overflow, utterance, or projection of the thought and feelings of the poet: or else (in the chief variant formulation) poetry is defined in terms of the imaginative process which modifies and synthesizes the images, thoughts, and feelings of the poet.” As such, it constitutes a particular form of *truth*: “A work of art is essentially the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling, and embodying the combined product of the poet’s perceptions, thoughts, and feeling. The primary source and subject

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<sup>27</sup> Reyes, 203.

matter of a poem, therefore, are the attributes and actions of the poet's own mind."<sup>28</sup> Abrams contrasts the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romantic paradigm of art as "expression" with the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Neo-classical paradigms of "mimesis" (art as "mirror" of the world) and "pragmatism" (Horace's to "delight" and to "teach"). Crucially for us, he elucidates the transition among paradigms in relation to the emergence of philosophic positivism:

An index to this change is the kind of non-poetic discourse most frequently set up as the antithesis, or logical opposite, of poetry. Ever since Aristotle, it had common to illuminate the nature of poetry, conceived as an imitation of an action, by opposing it to history. History, it was frequently said, represents single actions in past time, whereas poetry represents the typical and recurrent forms of actions, or else it represents events not as they are, but as they might be, or ought to be. But to Wordsworth, the appropriate business of poetry is 'to treat of things not as they *are*... but as they *seem* to exist to the *senses*, and to the *passions*,' and as worked upon 'in the spirit of genuine imagination.' The most characteristic subject matter of poetry no longer consists of actions that never happened, but of things modified by the passions and imagination of the perceiver; and in place of history, the most eligible contrary to poetry, so conceived, is the unemotional and objective description characteristic of physical science.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, as a *mode of knowledge* (poetry) distinct from the natural sciences the concept of "expression" was fundamental to aesthetic praxis and reflection all throughout the 19<sup>th</sup>-century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>. It was still the main theoretical tool in Benedetto Croce's 1902 *L'Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale*, an explicit presence in Reyes's *Cuestiones estéticas*.

In his reflections on Mallarmé's poetry, Reyes claims that the paradigm of expression had been misunderstood by Mallarmé and his poetic disciples. The essay begins with a crucial distinction between the material reality of language and what Reyes calls the poet's "power of introspection." For Reyes, interiority is conceived in modern fashion as *flux*: a stream of

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<sup>28</sup> M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 21-22.

<sup>29</sup> Abrams, 298-299.

sensations, ideas and memories which cannot be discretely differentiated, except by analytical violence.<sup>30</sup> If the poet's task is to make external (visible or audible) what exists only in subjectivity's secret chamber, the logic conclusion is that the material means towards this end, *language*, is inescapably flawed. This is the initial realization of every poet, "que el escritor posee solamente un medio torpe y viciado, manifestación de vicios anteriores; porque las ideas no son ya las cosas, las palabras no son las ideas, y la palabra escrita no es, ni con mucho, la palabra hablada."<sup>31</sup> It is only natural, then, for the poet to seek a more perfect way of expression, "esfuerzo poderoso para perfeccionar el tosco lenguaje [...] hacer más directa la manifestación literaria [...] traer el medio defectuoso a la obediencia de los fines y de los modos de pensar; delirio, en suma, de perfección [...] y acaso la de la soñada correspondencia cabal entre las cosas y la voluntad teórica."<sup>32</sup> This was, for Reyes, the "ideological" dimension of Mallarmé's poetry: the dreamt correspondence between things and the theoretical will, between *le choses* and *le mots*, "a delirium for perfection."

There is a complex play of, as it were, linguistic supply and demand in the delirium of "transparent expression," as Reyes baptized the ideal communion between artist and spectator facilitated by the aesthetic experience: "Mallarmé, con justo motivo, quiso, para la literatura, un elemento original y diverso del usado en las diarias transacciones humanas, distinguiendo así el lenguaje que llamó *escrito* – el lenguaje de la literatura, de las *expresiones* – del que llamó *hablado* – el lenguaje de las *comunicaciones* humanas."<sup>33</sup> It is *common use* that wears out language, as if words were engraved coins that, worn out by many hands, could no longer be read and recognized.

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<sup>30</sup> William James's *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) and Henri Bergson's *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889) and *Matière et mémoire* (1896) underpin Reyes's notion of a self built out of fluctuating impressions, memories and moods.

<sup>31</sup> Reyes, "Cuestiones estéticas," 90.

<sup>32</sup> Reyes, 90.

<sup>33</sup> Reyes, 99.

This distinction between the language of “daily human transactions” and *literary* language was registered by Mallarmé as the distinction between the *spoken* and the *written*. As a *writing* praxis, Mallarmé’s poetic procedure is the perfect reverse of discursive development, very much in the manner of Valdés’s *titles*. Here, the law of “development” is substituted by that of “analogy.” Rather than progressive discourse, bound to narrative and time, Mallarmé (as read by Reyes) attempted the *simultaneous*, in the sense, if the example be allowed, a matryoshka doll is simultaneous - an overlapping of mayor and minor correspondences:

...cómo quería Mallarmé crear una nueva forma de libro (donde, por ejemplo, cada página contuviese una sola frase o un solo verso); cómo quería que cada verso equivaliese a una sola palabra; cómo buscaba que la consonancia fuera, también analogía de ideas, y no puramente eco de sonidos [...] cuánta importancia concedía a las innovaciones sintácticas. Porque su anhelo – verdadera ley de artista – tendía, por encima de todo, a *expresar el alma directamente*, en cuanto el lenguaje articulado de los hombres lo permite...<sup>34</sup>

The “delirium for perfection” means that all elements in the poem are analogous to each other. Properly managed, every word can function as a verse, every verse as a whole poem, and every poem again as a single letter within a grander totality, of which the *Book* is the material and metaphorical *Absolut*. The Book represents the ideal encounter between the singular and the abstract, between any particular, material element of the poem and its most extensive semantics, which ultimately have its foundation in the “direct expression of the [artist’s] soul.” This are indeed Valdés’s *titles*, “frase o proposición insustituible” not only because of the particular meaning produced by the singular totality of the sentence, but in relation to the system of analogies which unifies every material and semantic element of the poem.

For Reyes, however, “expression” as “the internal made external” (in Abrams terms) necessarily implied a phantasmagoric relation between the actual work and its producer, as well

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<sup>34</sup> Reyes, 91-92.

as the community of consumer/readers. If art were to “represent” or “externalize” any interior, individual, or subjective “truths,” its materialization could only proceed by infinite approximation:

Ni el tiempo infinito bastaría para acabar el intento de Mallarmé: la expresión directa. Sino que su obra – a haber dispuesto Mallarmé de mayores trechos que los humanos – sería un perpetuo *devenir*, un progreso constante, sin remate posible ni concebible, un acercamiento perenne, del cual la obra que nos queda puede solo ser el movimiento inicial. Afinar la percepción y verterla más directamente en las palabras, y hacer, por ultimo, que los signos escritos correspondan con fidelidad a la entonación emitida, el acento enfático [...] una infinita carrera, ascendente y segura, y sin término ni acabamiento [...] su *estética en evolución* desplegada sobre el tiempo infinito...<sup>35</sup>

Whereas school language suppressed poetry’s free play of desire (language’s “broad and lyric impulse,” according to Valdés), Mallarmé’s attempt at “transparent expression” meant an infinite postponement. If the school chastised, Mallarmé offered an infinite seduction which was also the seduction of the infinite, a desire that does not find consummation in language but always signals to something beyond itself. As such, the French poet’s aesthetics were no less deceiving (although certainly more prestigious) than the poetics of development taught at schools:

Pero la estética de la expresión directa, irrealizable en tan absoluto concepto como la soñó Mallarmé, es la quimera intelectual para todos los trabajadores del arte [...] cada vez había de llevarlo tal estética a ser más incompresible y a quedar aún más incomunicado [...] llegaría a términos en que la comunicación con los demás hombres le fuera por completo vedada. Porque hay que esclarecer ideas: expresarse no es comunicarse [...] La expresión es resultante de la plenitud de la vida en todos sus estados (rayo, fruto, manantial o canción), y tiene su fin en sí, por el desahogo que ocasiona al ser rebosante; al paso que la comunicación existe solo para fines enteramente útiles.<sup>36</sup>

*Transparent expression* was but an intellectual chimera, in so far as its *end* was forever receding. Even if it were to be achieved – if an authentic *expression* could actually be formulated – it would only produce the poet’s alienation from common language. And here Reyes offers, in an almost off-hand manner, his own interpretation of “expression” not as the “internal made external” but as *surplus*, an excess of “life” in search of release (“desahogo”). We shall discuss Reyes’s conception

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<sup>35</sup> Reyes, 95.

<sup>36</sup> Reyes, 96.



of poetic expression as *surplus* briefly. For now, let us note that Mallarmé's poetry was condemned to be the perpetual essay of itself, an indefinite process of purification of the poet's linguistic reservoir: "...dejó para más oportuna sazón las realizaciones puramente poéticas, y en preparar el laboratorio y destilar las primeras sustancias empleó la vida, sin que llegara a combinar los metales sobre el horno mágico."<sup>37</sup> It was an infinite poetic "almost there" which kept displacing poetry itself away from the poet's reach.

For Reyes, Mallarmé's 'failure' was again the result of an improper relation between the poet and scholarly culture. In this case, however, it was not the professorial mania of development which thwarted language in its search for expression, but rather the poet's attachment to a particular school of philosophy: Hegelianism. The relation between Hegel's theoretical aesthetics and Mallarmé's poetry was a commonplace in the literary and academic discussions of the moment, which Reyes knew through the writings of French critic and poet Camille Mauclair. In *L'art en silence*, Mauclair had argued that "la conception fondamentale de Stéphane Mallarmé procède directement de l'esthétique métaphysique de Hegel" and that for Mallarmé "les idées pures étaient les seuls êtres réels et virtuels de l'univers, alors que les objets et toutes les formes de la matière n'en étaient que le signes."<sup>38</sup> For Mauclair, this was Mallarmé's poetic greatness; for Reyes, his tragic flaw:

Pero la conciencia de Stéphane Mallarmé, siempre vivaz, penetrando, pervadiendo las propias manifestaciones mentales hasta lo increíble, lo llevó a intentar con cada poesía — más aún, con cada verso— la solución de los problemas teóricos de la estética hegeliana, produciéndose así una confusión lamentable entre los procesos del pensamiento lógico y los procesos poéticos, que son tan diversos. El estético teórico busca las leyes según las cuales sienten los hombres la belleza; pero si el poeta quiere seguirlo, hará,

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<sup>37</sup> Reyes, 92.

<sup>38</sup> Camille Mauclair, *L'art en silence* (Paris: P. Ollendorff, 1901).

invariablemente, obra de mera ingeniosidad, cuando no de “retórica”. Es ésta una de las formas de literatura tendenciosa.<sup>39</sup>

Here, “rhetoric” does not mean verbosity but poetry’s claudication to theory. Language’s free play of desire, its need for release and expression, is now disciplined by the philosopher’s “general laws” of beauty. Rather than suppressed, we should say it is deviated or mis-directed: Reyes writes of literature being “seduced by theoretical aesthetics” and of poetry “straying from its essential orientation.”<sup>40</sup> The fundamental consequence of this “unfortunate confusion between the logical process and the poetic process” was a communication breakdown:

Quando Mallarmé se empeñaba en aplicar una nueva forma o dicción, igual que cuando escribía un poema con el mero fin de mostrar que cada uno de sus versos equivalía a una palabra, o que las cosas no son sino signo de una sugestión informulable (como si quisiera volver la precisión de contornos propia del lenguaje a la primitiva fuente de la conciencia, confusa, indefinible), nada en verdad quería ya decir al corazón de los hombres, si bien deleitaba a los psicólogos<sup>41</sup>

To delight psychologists is as much as to entertain philosophers, not only because philosophy and psychology were at the moment very close to each other as disciplines (think, again, of William James and Henri Bergson), but because for Reyes philosophers and psychologists (attacks on sociologists also abound) are metonyms representing a wider category: the *specialist*. By accepting the burden of a particular academic discipline, poetry gives up its claim to universality and thus to the possibility of functioning as a *lingua franca* amongst professions.

For Reyes, Mallarmé’s poetry ended up becoming a new form of school-language: “Así los trabajos de Mallarmé recuerdan vagamente los temas de composición para los niños, en que éstos, tomando pie de algunas ideas iniciadas, de algunas frases sin ilación inmediata, tienen que llenar,

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<sup>39</sup> Reyes, “Cuestiones estéticas,” 96. In “El ‘culto a Mallarmé’ de Alfonso Reyes: la poesía moderna y la lengua de la Polis,” Ignacio Sánchez Prado argues that “es precisamente esta afinidad de la poesía mallarmeana con el régimen idealista de pensamiento lo que hace al poeta francés compatible con la obra alfonsina primera,” a position that seems scarcely tenable in light of the previous passage.

<sup>40</sup> Reyes, 96-97.

<sup>41</sup> Reyes, 97.

con desarrollos personales, las líneas puntuadas.”<sup>42</sup> Valdés had suggested that students stop developing themes and start inventing *titles* in order to correct the rhetorical habits which prevented language’s free-play. But the theory and praxis of “transparent expression” is paradoxically a new form of discipline. The final paragraph of “El proceso ideológico de Stéphane Mallarmé” lavishes praise on the French poet, while turning him into an *exemplum* for future poets:

...una fuerza espiritual tan pasmosa, aunque desvirtuada en el empeño de disciplinarse, que, por pasmosa justamente, nos hará lamentar el que no se haya conformado con estallar y libertarse, desordenada e informe, con el encanto de los desbordamientos y las tempestades naturales. El misterio de las energías en potencia, cuando las apaga el espíritu voluntariamente, tiene siempre algo de doloroso. ¡Quién sabe qué fuentes rumorosas ciegan los que se disciplinan el alma, y con qué dolor tan callado! Mucho más libres fueron sin duda aquellos que atronaron el aire con los gritos de la poesía bíblica, la cual todavía nos fatiga el ánimo por su empuje verdaderamente material.<sup>43</sup>

The true spectacle in Mallarmé’s poetry is that discipline has been internalized, its “latent potencies” extinguished. This is true for Mallarmé as well as for Valdés, who also chastised himself and became consciously sterile, as we shall soon see.

Reyes’s meditations on the theory and praxis of Mallarmé’s poetry play out a complex narrative of desire and distinction whose ultimate end is literary “expression.” Mallarmé’s writing answers the need of a specialized poetic language, immune to the “history of vices” of the everyday language of “transactions.” In its search for “transparent expression,” however, poetic language gets lost within its own self, deviating from its essential course and becoming entrapped in a circuit of infinitely postponed desire. Mallarmé’s poetics, however admirable, were a *cul-de-sac*, incapable of providing the experience of aesthetic consummation/communication demanded by true “expression.” It is as if Reyes were walking on a tightrope and could fall on either side: on the one hand recognizing the necessity of a specialized poetic language, while on the other striving to

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<sup>42</sup> Reyes, 100.

<sup>43</sup> Reyes, 101.

maintain its potential for universalization. And this applies both to concepts and style: Reyes's "artistic critique," commented upon by García Calderón in his prologue to *Cuestiones estéticas*, strives to enact in prose this literary language, the "distinction" of which is precisely its capability to overcome distinction, to become "general."

At another level of analysis, the need of communication meant a limit between the theory and practice of aesthetics, between the schools' discourse and the poet's praxis. The "confusion" between procedures, according to Reyes, resulted in "rhetoric," in "tendentious literature:" the language of specialists. If poetry sought to solve philosophical issues, it would only attract the interest of philosophers. Behold another tightrope dance. On the one hand, poetry's independence from philosophy signals the need of a new kind of theory particular to literature. On the other, this particular theory ought to emerge from literature and poetry's "general" character: it is a theory of what is not specialized, a theory that does not speak school-language. This ambivalence is not resolved in "El procedimiento ideológico de Stéphane Mallarmé," although it points towards Reyes's final solution, fully developed in the last scene of Valdés and Castro's dialogue. In a passage previously quoted, Reyes defined "transparent expression" as the "chimera for all *workers of art*" [italics mine]. At the end of the essay, he concludes: "...los más altos poetas dieron por resueltos todos los problemas extraños a su producción especial," and that "la realización literaria está dentro de la misma literatura," suggesting that the linguistic materials of poetry are indeed fit for its "expressive" end.<sup>44</sup>

At the end of "El demonio de la biblioteca," Valdés and Castro leave the library to take a leisurely walk in the garden. If they are not yet at the point of a communication breakdown, at least

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<sup>44</sup> Reyes, 98.

Castro's plan of an afternoon of work has gone, literally, out the window. An oppressive atmosphere impels Valdés to go outside: "En el ambiente de tu taller aletea el aburrimiento con sus alas de plomo y los sueños de cabeza pesada asoman por los rincones del salón y tras de los libros." If Plato had defined poets as *winged* beings, now boredom is given "wings of lead." You can have my title, *Molestias del trato de poetas*, Valdés offers Castro before he leaves. But the young poet answers that it would be a shame to develop it and follows his master outside.

*III. The Salon: On Leisure, Analysis and Domestic interiors (with additional commentary on Childhood, Libraries and Fathers)*

At the start of the two friends' second dialogue, "El duende de la casa," we find Castro and Valdés having coffee inside the former's salon. A significant displacement has occurred: we have gone from the workspace (the library), Castro's so-called "taller," to the leisurely space of domestic interiors. In fact, as Valdés informs the reader, Castro has thrown the key to his workshop into the garden's pond. The aspiring poet is now a disciple of Valdés, although it is the master's concern for the well-being of his student that initiates the dialogue: "No ha sido menester que yo añadiese a mis consejos los muchos formulados por autores de tu devoción sobre las ventajas del ocio. En pocos días he logrado atraerte a mi doctrina; pero nunca te volví a ver contento desde que cerraste la puerta de tu taller y tiraste la llave al estanque. Diré, sin embargo, que no te temo arrepentido, ni te busco indeciso. ¿Qué es lo que te hace sufrir?"<sup>45</sup> Castro now resembles one of the miserable students described by the newspapers in their attacks against the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria; like Reyes's Mallarmé, his "latent potencies" remain undeveloped. It is with bitter irony that he refers to Valdés as "my Socrates" before answering the master's command.

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<sup>45</sup> Reyes, 126.

Here, however, the text's *mise en scène* as a humanist dialogue must again be interrogated. Discussions of Reyes's classicism often forget the radically modernist way in which he appropriated the archive and cultural capital of classical literature. One very important historical mediation in this process came through the works of Walter Pater and the 19<sup>th</sup>-century British aesthetes.<sup>46</sup> When Valdés speaks of Castro's devotion to authors who discuss the advantages of leisure, the first referent is indeed Pater's advanced disciple: Oscar Wilde. The Irishman had published in 1891 a collection of four dialogues and essays – “The Decay of Lying,” “Pen, Pencil, and Poison,” “The Critic as Artist” and “The Truth of Masks” – under the title of *Intentions*, a heading used by Reyes to title the section of *Cuestiones estéticas* that begins with “Tres diálogos.” Two of the texts that Wilde collected in 1891 were dialogues, previously published in London magazines: “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist.” In both, the dialogic situation is the same: a couple of friends in a domestic library discuss the relations between fine art and modern life. In “The Critic as Artist,” Gilbert and Ernest discuss in two scenes “the importance of doing nothing” and “the importance of discussing everything.” The dialogue is a witty critique of bourgeois “utilitarianism,” displayed not only at the level of content but through the rhetorical strategies of paradox and irony by which “doing nothing” and “discussing everything” constantly elude “utilitarian” appropriation, never turning into general principle or prescriptive doctrine. To truly “do nothing” means to engage in a language game where sense is offered only to be hidden away at the next moment. The implicit reference in Reyes's dialogue to Wilde is made explicit soon after, when Valdés self-identifies as *The Portrait of Dorian Grey's* Lord Henry: “Para mí, como para el Lord Henry de Oscar Wilde, nada hay más interesante que mi propia alma y las

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<sup>46</sup> Susana Quintanilla remarks that “Walter Pater se convirtió en autor de culto en el interior del pequeño universo creado alrededor de la figura tutelar del escritor dominicano.” Henríquez Ureña read Pater's *Greek Studies*, a posthumous anthology, in the late 1890's and later translated it into Spanish; the translation was published by the *Revista Modern de México* in 1908. See Quintanilla, “Dionisio en México...,” 630.

pasiones de los amigos.”<sup>47</sup> The Socratic figure that Valdés performs is made in great measure of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century dandy’s ironic refinement, its distaste for productivity and its self-definition through classical culture.<sup>48</sup>

This modernist setting points also to the second referent of “the advantages of leisure:” José Enrique Rodó. *Ariel* is here an index of the wider *modernista* motif of the domestic interior. It is well known that the identification between subjective interiority and domestic interiors was one of the crucial tenets of post-romantic poetic praxis across both sides of the Atlantic during the second-half the 19<sup>th</sup>-century.<sup>49</sup> In the case of Spanish America, the synthesis between interiority and interiors produced what Gerard Aching called (using Rodó’s language) the *modernistas*’ “reino interior,” a performative space through which poets and writers negotiated their own social status and that of their productions. As Aching notes, the *modernistas*’ “interior realm” was a historical variation of the classic and humanist *locus amoenus* (an insight that will be important at

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<sup>47</sup> Reyes, “Cuestiones estéticas,” 127.

<sup>48</sup> For the reception of Oscar Wilde in Spanish America see Sylvia Molloy, “Too Wilde for Comfort: Desire and Ideology in Fin-de-Siecle Spanish America,” *Social Text*, no. 31/32, Third World and Post-Colonial Issues (1992): 187-201; and “The Politics of Posing” in *Perennial Decay: on the aesthetics and politics of decadence*, ed. Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff and Matthew Potolsky (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999). In a letter from May 2nd 1911, Henríquez Ureña writes to Reyes: “A propósito de Wilde, he leído un largo detalle del proceso en un libro de Marc-André Raffalowich, *Uranisme et unisexualité*. Raffalowich book argues that “es imposible fijar los límites entre la heterosexualidad y la homosexualidad” and that, in Wilde’s case, “él no era vicioso [...] atribuye su corrupción a Lord Alfred Douglas y a la sociedad inglesa.” See *Epistolario íntimo (1906-1946)* (Santo Domingo: Universidad Nacional Pedro Henríquez Ureña, 1981), 123.

<sup>49</sup> To my knowledge, the best analysis of the relation between “interiority” and “interiors” is to be found in Theodor Adorno’s reflections on the philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard: “The fitting name of the ‘situation,’ as the powerless-momentary indifferention of subject and object, is not the castle, with which Kierkegaard romantically compares inwardness. Nor need the name be established sociologically by mere ‘coordination’ with Kierkegaard; rather, it is pragmatically implicit in his work. And, indeed, it is to be found in the imagery of the apartment interior, which, while it discloses itself only to interpretation, demands interpretation by its striking independence. It is the bourgeois *intérieur* of the nineteenth century, before which all talk of subject, object, indifferention, and situation pales to an abstract metaphor, even though for Kierkegaard the image of the *intérieur* itself serves only as a metaphor for the nexus of his fundamental concepts.” *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). Adorno’s analysis is all the more striking if we consider the similarities between Kierkegaard’s castle and the *modernistas*’ “alcázar,” a metaphor for “interiority” with which we shall deal later on in this chapter.

a later moment of this essay).<sup>50</sup> For now, it is enough to remark that the *modernistas*' "interior realm" was not a stable signifier but rather an intense site of symbolic struggle. *Ariel's* variation of this literary *topos* is formulated in Prospero's tale of the "hospitable king," an episode that has received much critical attention.<sup>51</sup> Here, it is important to recover the notion that Prospero's "interior realm" was no site of idleness, but of what he called *noble leisure*: moments of intellectual detachment in which the subject reconfigures the world according to a logic different from the market's means-ends rationality. Rodo's variation of the "interior realm" *topos* is intended to safeguard an interior time and space from the encroaching demands of industrial and professional work. The hospitable king's secret chamber, where he retires to enjoy *noble leisure*, is no place of idleness, but a space more akin to the private studio/domestic library where Castro and Valdés began their dialogue.

Finally, it is revealing to think of the domestic interiors in "Tres diálogos" in relation to Reyes's own personal history and the formation of his poetic imaginary. As Alfonso Rangel Guerra shows in his study of Reyes's early life and poetry, the poet's family house in Monterrey, on Degollado street (now Hidalgo), dominates Reyes's literary cartography, from early poems to latter autobiographical writings.<sup>52</sup> By Reyes's own admission, "la casa fue un personaje real en mi vida." Whereas other contemporary intellectuals, such as José Vasconcelos, mythologized their earliest schoolyears, Reyes was emphatic that his childhood was nothing but his childhood home: "...mi auténtica vida infantil recorría en una órbita aparte. Estaba más bien en mis lecturas, en mis

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<sup>50</sup> "As a literary commonplace, the *reino interior* descends from the Western tradition of the *locus amoenus* [...] The *modernistas*' innovation and tendency, however, was to situate their contemplation indoors. In their literature, there are abundant descriptions of salons, drawing-rooms, cells in castles and monasteries, alcoves, medieval or preindustrial work-rooms, and other private niches." Aching, *The Politics of Spanish American Modernismo*, 28.

<sup>51</sup> See, again, González Echeverría, "The case of the speaking statue."

<sup>52</sup> Alfonso Rangel Guerra, *Norma para el pensamiento: la poesía de Alfonso Reyes* (Mexico city: El Colegio de México, 2014), 69.



reflexiones solitarias, en mis paseos por la huerta de casa, por el campo.” And, of the interior and exterior spaces that made the house on Degollado street, it was in his father’s library where the child Alfonso found most joy:

No tardé en descubrirla. Llegó a convertirse en el refugio de mi fantasía. Allí leí a una edad inverosímil, *La Divina Comedia*, traducción de Cheste, más bien por el deseo de comprender las estampas; eso sí, leí el *Quijote* con las admirables ilustraciones de Doré, en una edición tan enorme que me sentaba yo encima del libro para alcanzar los primeros renglones de cada página. Descubrí el *Orlando furioso*, descubrí al Heine de los *Cantares* y aun trataba yo de imitarlo, así como a Espronceda; descubrí mis inclinaciones literarias. Todo esto, por de contado, se leía en el suelo; modo natural de lectura, lectura auténtica del antiguo gimnasio, como todavía nos lo muestran los vasos griegos de Dipilón.<sup>53</sup>

If the house represented already a magical space separated from the outside world, the paternal library represents a second degree of separation. It is precisely this isolation, however, that allows the child’s “fantasy” to expand. Notice that, at the end of the passage, the domestic library is represented as the “authentic” pedagogical setting, the Greek gymnasium. The “authenticity” of reading on the floor, we must assume, hints at the inauthentic character of contemporary formal education, the artificiality of children sitting on desks.

In her seminal study of 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century autobiographies, Sylvia Molloy shows the significance that *casonas* or family homes had for Spanish American writers as *loci* of memory; a space that also illustrates the relation between mothers, as the origin of myth, and the discovery of books.<sup>54</sup> In Alfonso Reyes’s memories, it was the father-figure who embodied domestic order as the precondition of “culture.” The mythical space of the home was dominated by the God-like figure of the General: “Y yo, desde niño, aprendí a ver en aquella cara luminosa y radiante, en aquellos ojos de incomparable atracción; aprendí a descubrir en aquella voz clara y alegre, en

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<sup>53</sup> Emmanuel Carballo, *Diecinueve protagonistas de la literatura mexicana del siglo XX* (Mexico City: Empresas Editoriales, 1965), 106-107.

<sup>54</sup> Sylvia Molloy, *At Face Value: Autobiographical Writing in Spanish America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

aquella mezcla del Zeus olímpico y del caballero romántico, la imagen misma de la Naturaleza: una divinidad henchida de poder y bondad que no podría nunca equivocarse.”<sup>55</sup> Not only as master of the house, but as Governor of one of Mexico’s most prosperous states, the General represented an “emanación del orden olímpico.” Reyes was emphatic that this “order” was founded both on “power” and “goodness,” authority and intimacy: “...mi padre que así me llegaba hasta mi ternura y mi respeto, no solo adornado con las virtudes más adorables y exquisitas (aquel férreo Campeador tenía dulzuras y arrullos increíbles), sino también ungido con las bendiciones sobrenaturales de la fuerza.”<sup>56</sup> This paternal order, nonetheless, imposed precise limits on the expansion of fantasy, limits of a particular kind. There is one recollection of the General that burns with a special intensity in Reyes’s late writings. On a family occasion after Alfonso had published, at seventeen, his first poems (three sonnets under the general title of “Duda,” an *arielista* theme par excellence) in the local and national press, a friend of the family addressed him as “poeta,” to which the General curtly replied: “-¡No! – le atajó mi padre-. Entre nosotros no se es poeta de profesión.”<sup>57</sup> The General believed, his son tells us, that in an “underdeveloped” society every individual had the duty of “actividades prácticas,” a moral responsibility towards the world of work. Poetry was a noble pastime, an “afición.”

We now start to glimpse the import of the domestic spaces in “Tres diálogos.” At surface level, each space works as allegory: the library is the place of *work*, the interior salon is the place of *idleness*, and the third and final scene function’s as the overcoming of library/interiors into a particular synthesis, signified by the garden. Within this allegoric division of space movement creates meaning, and the two friends’ displacement from the library to the interiors can be easily

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<sup>55</sup> Alfonso Reyes, “Crónica de Monterrey. Albores. Segundo libro de recuerdos,” *Obras completas XXIV* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990), 544.

<sup>56</sup> Reyes, “Albores,” 545.

<sup>57</sup> Reyes, “Historia documental...,” 151.

read as Castro's fall into unproductive despair. But Reyes's conscious re-doubling of the *modernistas*' "interior realm" also opens the possibility to read "Tres diálogos" as the conversation between two principles of the self. In other words, that the three spaces (library, interior, garden) and the two voices (Castro's and Valdés's) are but the single cartography of a personal interior. The dialogic situation in Reyes's text thus stands not only for intellectual's search for "spiritual community" but also for a scission within the individual which must be sutured for community to exist. If this is the case, the relation between Valdés and Castro is not only analogous to the social relation between critic and poet but posits "critique" and "poetry" as two distinct faculties of each individual self that must be reconciled. Thus, Valdés is not merely the social antagonist of Castro, but every poet's inner critical voice, a sort of poetical super-ego which, if left wild, could haunt the poet's "reino interior" and transform domestic harmony and productivity into sterility.

Like Mallarmé's, Valdés's theoretical lust is in fact an interiorized form of discipline – which Reyes identifies with higher education. In "El duende de la casa," Castro demands that, in exchange for "giving up" his soul to his master and answering the initial inquiry, Valdés must reveal why he abandoned the life of work in the first place. For, now we find, at some point Valdés actually had artistic ambitions as a playwright – he is not only Socrates but also Plato, a failed poet turned critic. Valdés agrees to the Faustian exchange and explains his desertion from the world of production:

Pero sábete que poseo un alma interior tan emponzoñada que pronto se volvió en contra mía: los hombres la llaman *el análisis* [...] el gusto por el drama y por los problemas de la escena ¿adónde me había de conducir sino a desarrollar poderosamente mi tendencia analítica? Esto pasaba en los primeros años de mi juventud, edad para todos de regocijos sintéticos; para mí, de inquietudes analíticas. Al principio, a todos divertía con mi humorismo y con mis charlas. ¿Te acuerdas?<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Reyes, "Cuestiones estéticas," 127.

There was indeed a time, in which Valdés's conversation and wit gathered around him a "young entourage". Like Mallarmé, however, he was at some point subjugated by the analytic principle. The moment of this transition from conversation/community to analysis/isolation - "los primeros años de mi juventud" - are the school years. Thus, for Castro and Valdés discussing the analytic "disease" is also remembering "los tiempos en que pasábamos largas noches alistándonos para los exámenes de la escuela y discutiendo las especies de nuestros estudios."<sup>59</sup> The institutional background for Valdés's "disease" is academic and professional specialization ("las especies de nuestros estudios") and what is internalized as *analysis* is indeed the school's curricular structure, its separation between forms of knowledge.

Valdés's problems with modern drama, the cause of his "disease," derived (again, like Mallarmé's case) from a confusion between dramatic praxis and the kind of phenomenology of self which characterized certain academic disciplines such as psychology (William James) and philosophy (Henri Bergson) at the turn of the century: "...a fuerza de salir al paso y atajar todos los procesos de mi mente; de tanto atribuir significaciones subjetivas a los más leves, a los más fugaces signos de las fisonomías; por mucho buscar explicaciones a través de nimios efectos, mi arma, el análisis, se hizo inquietante, brava, agresiva."<sup>60</sup> It is enough to read *Cuestiones estéticas*' first essay, "Las tres Electras del teatro ateniense," to realize how distant this modern form of psychological drama is from Reyes's idea of theatre as the site of catharsis and release. In a sense, Valdés is a contemporary version of Reyes's Euripides, the disciple of Socrates who marked the end of Athenian tragedy by exchanging the rigorous objectivity of Aeschylus and Sophocles for the "modern" introspection of his dialectic master.<sup>61</sup> This fetishization of the "theoretical will"-

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<sup>59</sup> Reyes, 127

<sup>60</sup> Reyes, 127-128.

<sup>61</sup> "Pero es que Eurípides posee una dialéctica tan envenenada que acaba por destruirse a sí propia. Llega, con su genio dialéctico, a todos los escepticismos, y este escepticismo final es sólo la realización, el punto a que naturalmente

the dreamt correspondence between theory and things – produces, again, a communication breakdown. Valdés is estranged from his former entourage: “Mi compañía molestaba ya a los amigos; les resultaba enojoso que los detuviera yo, al paso, por las calles y en todas partes, para explicarles con mordedora intención la mirada de algún paseante, el ademán de alguien; y que cortase sus charlas, como solía yo hacerlo, para estudiar el oculto movimiento de su ánimo.”<sup>62</sup> Here, analysis disrupts dialogue by declaring it superficial, the symptom of an underlying cause. It is as if Valdés’ friends were characters in a play, every gesture full of a meaning to be deciphered. He can no longer participate in the conversation because he is one step removed: “para mí todo era espectáculo, y perdí el sentimiento de las consideraciones sociales.”<sup>63</sup> To join the conversation would be as ridiculous as a spectator’s attempt to dialogue with dramatic characters during a play.

*Analysis* not only poisons Valdés’ conversation but, more dramatically, obstructs aesthetic expression, the release of the “lyrical” impulse. The analytic “disturbance” in his spirit produced “inverted” dramatic characters and an “inverted” theater, further alienating Valdés from his colleagues: “No quise mostrar a los amigos lo que había escrito: el trastorno de mi espíritu produjo su inevitable manifestación: mis personajes no sentían, se analizaban; no charlaban, sutilizaban; no se mostraban ante el espectador como seres humanos, en su aspecto exterior y sensible, sino invertidos, con el espíritu por de fuera, y disgregados en sus elementos anímicos: mi teatro era un teatro vuelto de revés.”<sup>64</sup> Previously, we saw how Mallarmé’s poetry was “seduced” by theoretical aesthetics, and thus deviated from its “essential orientation” towards an infinitely postponed desire. In the case of Valdés, the disaster is absolute. Unable to find proper release, the “lyrical impulse”

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alcanza, sin volverse atrás, sin desdecirse. Hay facultades cuyo desarrollo remata en el suicido, y en Eurípides las hallamos. Llega el óptimo florecimiento y sorprende al espíritu paralizado por un escepticismo cabal.” Reyes, 33.

<sup>62</sup> Reyes, 128.

<sup>63</sup> Reyes, 128.

<sup>64</sup> Reyes, 128.

invades social life: the characters he cannot create he finds amongst his friends: social exchange becomes “spectacle” as suppressed desire runs over the conventional limits of life and art. The relation between “life” and “art” is “inverted,” the latter subjugates the former, spills over its domains. Valdés explicitly states the erotic dimension of his analytic powers: “Yo amaba ya mi análisis como un vicio. Quise cultivarlo a despecho de todo. No escribí más. Desde entonces se me vio siempre entre la gente, en las fiestas, en las academias, analizándolo todo. Pero me hice avaro: a nadie comuniqué ya mis observaciones.”<sup>65</sup> Notice that Valdés does not love *analysis*, but *his* analysis. It is a narcissistic desire which lies at the base of Valdés’s self-exclusion from artistic expression and spiritual association.

To illustrate his plight, Valdés tells Castro about a German tale he once read. It is a fable involving a wiseman and a *Kobold* – a mischievous house-goblin popular in German folklore, which Reyes might have known through Jacob Grimm’s *German Mythology*. Let us hear it from Valdés himself, since the narration plays a crucial part in his pedagogical strategy:

Un día leí un cuento alemán: era un hombre perseguido por un duendecillo diminuto, un *koboldo*. El duendecillo, con quitarse la caperuza tradicional, se hacía visible, y, con ponérsela de nuevo, desaparecía. El duendecillo dio en inquietar al hombre: este hombre era un sabio. Y cada vez que hojeaba sus librotos, posados en toscos atriles, he ahí al duende que aparecía por sobre el libro, asomaba el rostro diminuto, y gesticulaba. Agitábase el sabio, daba pasos por la estancia. El duendecillo saltaba delante de los pies del sabio, haciendo ceremonias con la caperuza en la mano. Apresurábase el hombre, como para aplastar con el pie al huésped incómodo. Y el duendecillo apresuraba también sus saltos, y se iba como rebotando sobre el suelo, ante los pies que le perseguían; y, en cuanto se veía encerrado y preso contra la pared, se calaba el gorro y desaparecía. El hombre acudió a los encantadores (pues su ciencia no bastaba para este conjuro), acudió a los físicos: todos le aconsejaron que no pensara. —Vuestra enfermedad, le decían, es preocupación del espíritu y mal de cansancio: fuerza es que dejéis de pensar. — Impresionóme el cuento, y di en llamar *mi análisis* al duendecillo, o, si prefieres, *duendecillo* a mi análisis.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Reyes, 128-129.

<sup>66</sup> Reyes, 129.

The effectiveness of the fable lies in the three-fold analogy it establishes between the wiseman, Valdés and Castro. There is, first, the wiseman's room ("estancia") filled with huge books and heavy lecterns ("librotes," "toscos atriles") for reading and writing, yet they are haunted by a mischievous presence that cannot be controlled. But this room is also meant to make visible Valdés's own interiority, in which the school's principle of specialization, internalized as *his analysis*, prevents communication through reading and writing: "Que también, como el duendecillo, me asaltaba mi análisis apenas emprendía yo una lectura. De tal modo reaccionaba yo contra mis impresiones, por analizarlas, que apenas las dejaba llegar a mi alma, y por hacer la crítica de lo que leía, apenas me paraba en ello."<sup>67</sup> Finally, the fable and its narration re-enact "El demonio de la biblioteca," the first conversation between the two friends held in Castro's library/workshop. Valdés is now *el duendecillo* - the triumphant "theoretical will" - and the displacement from the library to the interior is really an invasion of Castro's wider interiority/home. The narration successfully links its content to its speaker and listener and forces the analogy between them to the point of identification.

It is at this moment of the friend's three dialogues - the climax scene in "El duende de la casa" - that the deepest moment of misrecognition occurs. After Valdés cynically confesses that he has told the goblin story "seven times to the same number of friends" and seen them all fall into unproductive idleness, Castro decides to rebel against his "golden reins of words." The rebellion, however, is a further proof of the master's influence: "Lo que lograrás, duende, con estar cantando tus virtudes de dominador de modo tan cínico, será sublevarme definitivamente contra tu dominio."<sup>68</sup> As Valdés notices, Castro's observation reveals how good an analyst he has become,

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<sup>67</sup> Reyes, 129.

<sup>68</sup> Reyes, 130.

something that is further emphasized when Castro *diagnoses*: “¡Eres vicioso! Y hasta creo que eres deshonesto. Nunca te había yo visto entregado a tales orgías; entregado, cínicamente, a la sensualidad socrática de meterte en el alma ajena.”<sup>69</sup> Castro is now aware that Valdés’s *analysis* is a form of erotic desire, and that awareness makes him complicit, infected by *el duendecillo*. Communication is now truly impossible, as the two friends are entrapped in a hellish circle, a play of mirrors and tricks. At the level of group formation, conversation has produced its radical opposite: complete isolation. At the level of interiority, it is a moment of radical skepticism: the self rebels against its analysis but, lacking a meta-language of critique, is only further buried into another theoretical layer. An impossible language, able to *defuse analysis un-analytically*, would be necessary to break out of this circle of mis-directed desire and misrecognition. It is no superfluous detail that the wiseman in the German tale looks for advice in “enchanters” and that his own science was “insufficient” in dealing with the Kobold. In this communicative situation, Castro’s final confession - he is “repentant of his idleness” - loses all its pathos and earnestness, becoming another proposition that should be subjected to analysis.

There is another solution, however. Rather than reestablishing the circuit of communication, it could be broken down completely. In other words, kicking Valdés out of the house. This is precisely what Castro does. It is a scene charged with the uncanny, reminiscent of Kafka’s “The Judgment” (published just a bit later, in 1912) and, of course, Julio Cortazar’s “Casa tomada,” published many years later:

No, Valdés, no me conviene ya tu presencia: invadiste mi biblioteca, me hiciste abandonártela y tirar la llave al estanque. Cuando vuelva a ella tendré que entrar por la ventana como un ladrón. Hoy invades ya mi salón. Y, según veo, pronto tendré que abandonarte la casa entera, al paso que te vas entrando en mi espíritu. ¡Pero ya no te percibo casi, que ha anochecido, y te me pierdes en la sombra del cuarto! Encenderé luces. Pues si

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<sup>69</sup> Reyes, 131.



te oigo moverte y no te veo, voy a juzgar que eres efectivamente un *koboldo*, o bien que no existes, que te he soñado para torturarme, y que tengo que dejar de pensar para que te ausentes de mí. Pues me has entrado tan hondamente que ya varias veces se me ha ocurrido que formas parte de mi moblaje espiritual.<sup>70</sup>

The two dimensions of the dialogue— conversation as group formation and as reconciled interiority — here receive their sharpest expression. Castro self-identifies with the domestic spaces when he says “...pronto tendré que abandonarte la casa entera, al paso que te vas entrando en mi espíritu,” and even more so in the very last sentence: “...me has entrado tan hondamente que ya varias veces se me ha ocurrido que formas parte de mi moblaje espiritual.” In this passage, the formulations “te vas entrando” and “me has entrado” (“entrar” could be translated as either “entering,” “penetrating” or “becoming part of”) produce a complex matrix of meaning in which erotic undertones characterize the dominion of the master over the disciple, a pedagogical relation that results not in productivity but in impotence. The degree to which the master becomes part of Castro’s “spiritual furniture” is indicated by Valdés’s bodily diffusion: night arrives, the room is filled with shadow, Castro seeks for light on in order to confirm his friend is not actually a house-spirit or a hallucination. And, indeed, the dialogue ends with Castro speaking alone, looking for a missing Valdés through the darkness and silence of his salon. The master’s dominance over the disciple is greatest when it becomes invisible, a presence as natural as the furniture in one’s own house. The identification between the wiseman, Valdés and Castro is complete.

“El duende de la casa” is, thus, nothing but the elaboration of its initial movement and scenery: the displacement from the library/workshop to Castro’s interior salon. That is, the dialogue is a minute dissection of the way a certain education ideology is internalized as discipline, the representation of an interiority being *taken over*. By turning the *modernistas*’ “interior realm,”

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<sup>70</sup> Reyes, 132.

into a space of dialogue Reyes is able to map out the play of forces, both interior and exterior, that configure the pedagogical formation of a self and its search for recognition and association. But the particular activity at work – *analysis* – must be further questioned. As I’ve argued, *analysis* represents for Reyes a type of school ideology characterized by the subject’s internalization of the institutional separation of disciplines. We cannot identify this ideology then with any particular academic language, be it psychology, philosophy, sociology or any other. Rather, *analysis* refers to every specialized discourse which, by its very institutional condition, must *analytically* define its object of study, that is, delimit and isolate an area of experience from others. By the distance it implies, *analysis* defuses literature’s pedagogic potential, its power to produce a particular kind of recognition between reader and text, as when words cannot longer reach Valdés’s soul before being subjected to critique. For Reyes, the impossible discourse that could critique analysis without becoming analysis was poetry, as we shall shortly see. For now, let us notice that the tension in “Tres diálogos” between poetry and analysis, general language and specialized languages, is *internally* derived from the role literature *should* play within state-funded higher education, as I have argued. In other words, it is not that poetry is being attacked from the *outside* by specialized discourses; the tension between the two elements is an elaboration of a particular institutional circumstance, related, first, to the fact that, since Barreda, higher education meant specialization and unification; and secondly to the institutional function Reyes and the Ateneo attached to poetry and the humanities. How could cultural works produce a new hegemony if they were themselves subject to analytic dismemberment?

But now we can go further and say that, against scholastic *analysis*, Reyes conceives of poetic labor through an image of domestic harmony. We have seen how Reyes’s variation of the *modernistas*’ “reino interior” maps out the play of two principles – the “poetic” and the “critic” –

in different symbolic spaces defined by their allegoric relations to work/productivity and idleness/sterility (or *impotence*). Domestic harmony refers to the reconciliation between these antithetical principles and spaces – the image of a harmonious economy of the self. But I’d like to propose another dimension to this *economic* harmony by suggesting that Reyes’s “reino interior” also signals the material conditions of the text’s own production.<sup>71</sup> In other words, domesticity represents a harmonious division of labor which has poetry as its fulfillment and coronation; poetry expresses nothing but its own nature as *excess* or *surplus*. Thus domesticity/poetry incarnates the “emanation of Olympic order” that Reyes symbolically attributed to his father. In a poem dated 1912, just a year after the publication of *Cuestiones estéticas*, Reyes revisited in verse the domestic scenery of “Tres diálogos” and established more explicitly the relation between poetry and *economy*. The poem – “Lluvias de Julio” – describes a poet’s attempt to capture in verse the sounds and images of falling rain. It begins by describing the material and symbolic space from where the poet watches the rain fall and writes, a private studio reminiscent of Castro’s library:

aquí donde las letras pintan oscuras cábalas  
sonríen y se tuercen como interrogación;  
donde, a mis ojos ávidos, se enciende cada página  
en un visible tremolo y una sensación

The space of writing – “adonde el cosquilleo paciente de la pluma / entinta los renglones, apura el español” – is also given specific temporal coordinates by a verse that is repeated at the beginning and end of the poem: “[aquí] se enciende la lámpara al apagarse el sol.” If the private studio shelters the poet from the rain outside, it is also a shelter against everyday work, from which writing poetry

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<sup>71</sup> See Beatriz Sarlo and Carlos Altamirano on the literary work as an object that “exhibe en su factura, en los procedimientos que le dan forma, la marca del modo en que ha sido producido y, en consecuencia, de las condiciones sociales de su producción,” in *Conceptos de sociología literaria* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1993), 108.

is qualitatively differentiated: “Es la hora en que, a diario, para seguir la obra, / enciéndese la lámpara al apagarse el sol.” But the poet is also conscious that the private studio, as the site of reclusion and expansion (“a ver si, como tú, me expando y vuelo y fluyo / y caigo en un relámpago de plata temblador”), depends on a wider network of labor:

¡aquí! Bien hayas tú, hada que me recluyes,  
la del flotante velo de cuentas sonador;  
inacabable lluvia que brotas y refluyes  
e inundas la morada de místico rumor

Apréstase el doméstico desfile de mujeres  
A proteger los tiestos, a cerrar el balcón:  
Humildes, invisibles, minúsculos deberes  
Cumplidos como una ritual celebración  
[...]  
El cielo se estremece todo como si fuera  
Un corazón. Yo acerco el rostro a la vidriera  
Y digo al alma mía: -¡Mira la bendición!...<sup>72</sup>

From this point onwards, the poem captures the rain in poetic form – the poetic vision (“look at that blessing!”) is facilitated by the material workings of domestic harmony, “women’s domestic parade.” The transformation of rain into poetry – a fountain that “springs up,” “surges” and “floods” the house with a “mystic murmur” – is part of a wider “ritual celebration” that functions through a gendered division of labor. The poem isolates the writing space from the spatiality and temporality of work, at the same time that it presents domestic labor as part of an order so ingrained that it has become harmony. The poem itself is but the performance of this *economic* harmony and the *surplus* it produces - “expression” is the result of “overabundant being.” Reyes poem is less an

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<sup>72</sup> Alfonso Reyes, *Obras Completas X* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1955), 63-65.

idealistic description of household camaraderie than the enactment in verse of the “Olympic order,” the mythic power which coerces and cares at the same time.

Thus, “Tres diálogos” can be read within a wider symbolic struggle between the analytic structure of schools and the harmonic economy of home. Reyes’s particular Law of the Father established the sacred distinction between “life” and “books,” work and action over fantasy: “– Tu casa es la escuela de la Naturaleza – solía decirme mi padre años más tarde, cuando yo volvía de vacaciones a mi tierra. Porque temía que me hubieran sofisticado del todo la vida de México y el excesivo trato de libros.”<sup>73</sup> Contrary to the “inverted” relation between life and art implied in scholastic *analysis*, the father figure was the incarnation of poetry itself:

Siempre lo sentí poeta, poeta en la sensibilidad y la acción; poeta en los versos que solía dedicarme, en las comedias que componíamos juntos durante las vacaciones por las sierras del norte; poeta en el despego con que siempre lo sacrificaba todo a una idea, poeta en su genial penetración del sentido de la vida, y en su instantánea adivinación de los hombres; poeta en el perfil quijotesco; poeta lanzado a la guerra como otro Martí, por exceso de corazón. Poeta, poeta a caballo.<sup>74</sup>

General Reyes was a poet fundamentally because he acted out his poetry, and this certainly included real writing, but only on breaks from work, on *holy-days*. Contrary to Valdés, whose tragic confusion between life and art puts one step removed from a life contemplated as spectacle, General Reyes’s “lyrical impulse” is expressed directly in his actions, a “poet on a horse,” like Don Quixote. Poetry happens not on the blank surface of the page but on the multifarious surface of the world. As we shall see, the reconciliation between Castro and Valdés, poetry and critique, happens through a *re-direction* of both principles towards the principle of “life” represented in Reyes’s recollections by General Reyes - the parallels meet in this newfound infinity.

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<sup>73</sup> Reyes, “Albores...,” 545.

<sup>74</sup> Alfonso Reyes, “Parentalia. Primer libro de recuerdos,” *Obras completas XXIV* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990), 403.

At the same time, Reyes's variation of the *modernistas*' "reino interior" points towards a particular social coordinate, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century *casona* and its domestic library. It is not only that *casonas* provided an occasion and an image for the development of the self, but that, in an institutional context where the most important collections of books were private, domestic life represented a circuit of acquisition, distribution and accumulation of cultural capital that far outreached state-funded institutions. In *Cuestiones estéticas*, there are two moments in which Reyes proudly reveals ownership of volumes he quotes: a 1634 edition of Gongora's poetry and an "old" Latin cosmography. When, in his spontaneous prologue to the collection, Francisco García Calderón mentioned General Reyes and said that in Alfonso "the laws of inheritance are fulfilled," we should not dismiss the comment as more of the pseudo-scientific nonsense characteristic of the moment - it is actually a precise and acute insight. Like in the case of many Spanish American writers, both men and women, literary "heirloom" meant not only early and easy access to cultural capital, but more importantly its actual *possession*. Today, it takes perhaps an effort of the imagination to conceive this sense of literal ownership over the materials of written culture. Yet it is an important effort to make, in so far as different forms of *transmission* of cultural capital imply different forms of *appropriation* and *ownership*. The student who encounters literary tradition at the school or in a public library obviously does not have the same relation to it as the child who finds precious volumes in the family home. The latter will sooner take to heart what the domestic library actually enacts: that culture is a capital to be appropriated and reproduced in the *interests* of the present or of a particular group within the present, rather than a closed archive that must be preserved. And this ownership, both material and symbolic, implies neither a strict rule over culture nor a passive stance towards it, but a *playful* or *ludic* relation. It is a relation best

defined by the images of Reyes's recollections: the child on top of a large edition of *Don Quixote*, illustrated by Doré; reading on the floor, as in the Greek gymnasiums.

#### *IV. The Garden: Humanism, Literary Language and the Professionalization of Culture*

“El duende de la casa” concludes with the dialogues’ deepest moment of miscommunication and misrecognition, a result of the *analytic* interaction between Castro and Valdés’s mischievous magistry. Once infected with *analysis*, any attempt to overcome it only confirmed its power. The self could no longer produce a critical language to overthrow its master, for master and critic were the same. And conversation became impossible in so far as there was nothing left but each interlocutor’s sheer will to power, the desire to *out-analyze* the other. This led to a false isolation: not the child’s withdrawal that serves fantasy but a communication breakdown in which the other, however, remains as a presence haunting the harmony of the self’s domestic interiors. Everything is now at an absolute standstill, no movement seems possible – dialogue is no more. What word, what gesture, could re-establish Castro’s and Valdés’s circuit of communication and recognition?

For Reyes, *literary* language ought to create the alternative circuit. There is nothing naïf or anti-intellectual about this position; there *is* something anti-scholastic and anti-professional. Poetic praxis seeks a language capable to overcome the jargons derived from the division of labor and knowledges. Poetry’s words constitute a *general* language that is not, however, “original,” “authentic” or “essential” – it does not precede the fracture of community and the self, but has it as its presupposition.<sup>75</sup> Thus, poetic language is *not*-specialized and poetic praxis is *not*-work.

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<sup>75</sup> “Esta crítica de la división del trabajo, ya operante en Martí, no presupone un concepto de cultura y de literatura anterior al régimen de la especialización. El campo literario finisecular genera un discurso de cultura como respuesta a la fragmentación moderna [...] El ‘concierto’ que la literatura le promete a su mundo no podía ser anterior a la especialización: opera como reacción a la misma, y como respuesta al relativo desplazamiento de la literatura de sus funciones en la administración (del sueño modernizador) de la sociedad tradicional.” See Julio Ramos, *Desencuentros de la modernidad en América Latina* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989), 214.

Reyes's Humanism was less a trans-historical impulse than a radically present-oriented institutional position, a particular stance in the wider process of the professionalization of high culture at institutions of higher education at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century.<sup>76</sup> The dialogues' final scene, "Las cigarras del jardín," stages this Humanism. A full immersion into the world of Platonic dialogues, the garden scene describes a new *locus amoenus*: a space and time that make possible an *unspecialized* literary language. As a *mise en scène* of successful recognition between interlocutors, it also displays the merits and miseries of Reyes's aesthetic take on communication, pedagogy and group-formation.

"Las cigarras del jardín" has an abrupt beginning: what is most significant happens right at the start. After their last meeting, Castro locked up the door to his house and forbade (whom? "el doméstico desfile de mujeres"?) the presence of guests, perhaps hoping no one would witness him entering his library through the window, "like a thief." Valdés, however, magically springs up in Castro's garden, his presence announced by shouts of joy: "¡Alegría, poeta, alegría!" Alarmed and depressed at the apparition, Castro asks *el duendecillo* just how he was able to get in, but Valdés insist on jumping straight into the matter at hand: "¡Alegría, poeta, alegría! He tenido un sueño de buen agüero." Without postponement, he begins the narration of the dream and is again interrupted by Castro, who demands a "previous explanation" of his friend's latest behavior. Again, Valdés plunges without answer into a dreamlike narration and Castro is eventually seduced

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<sup>76</sup> For Reyes's "classicism" or "hellenism" see: Margo Glantz, "Apuntes sobre la obsesión helénica de Alfonso Reyes," *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* 37, no.2 (1989): 425-432; Anthony Stanton, "Poesía y poética en Alfonso Reyes," *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* 37, no. 2 (1989): 621-642; César A. Salgado, "El periplo de la paideia: Joyce, Lezama, Reyes y el neohelenismo hispanoamericano," *Hispanic Review* 69, no. 1 (2001): 72-83; Susana Quintanilla, "Dioniso en México o cómo leyeron nuestros clásicos a los clásicos griegos," *Historia Mexicana* 51, no. 3 (2002): 619-663; Pedro Ángel Palou, *El clasicismo en la poesía mexicana: una indagación* (Puebla: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2010); Ignacio Sánchez Prado, "Alfonso Reyes y la crítica clásica: notas para una genealogía," in *Intermitencias americanistas: estudios y ensayos escogidos* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2012); Sergio Ugalde Quintana, "Alfonso Reyes lee a Nietzsche: cultura clásica y *ethos* agonista," *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* 67, no.1 (2019): 131-153.



by the dream, forgetting the need for reasons. This happens precisely – and this is the crucial point of “Las cigarras del jardín” – when Valdés has recourse to a literary metaphor to describe the dream: “Y el alcázar parecía una enorme cabeza de cien ojos que, uno tras otro, abriesen los párpados transparentes.” The rest of the dialogue will spell out the consequences of this moment, but *reconciliation* takes place right here, when literary language bypasses “previous explanation.” To have heeded the poet’s request would have only perpetuated the analytic circle in which the two friends were entrapped; the poetic does not require explanation but expression, and through it the “interest” of the interlocutor is aroused.

There is another piece in *Cuestiones estéticas* that advances the primacy of surface immediacy over historical or psychological explanations: the forementioned “Las tres *Electras* del teatro ateniense.” It is the earliest piece in the collection, dated 1908, and it reads like an excellent college essay, the work of a brilliant young student. It is also incredibly daring, as it represents a direct intervention (no explanation necessary) into the long and complex debate on the nature and origins of the chorus in Greek tragedy. Reyes addresses the most important moments of the debate: Schlegel and the chorus as “ideal spectator”; Hegel’s interpretation of it as the “spiritual essence” of antique theater; Schiller’s vision of the chorus as the element that separates the ideal sphere of tragic action from everyday life. Reyes criticizes the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Hellenist’s (there is explicit mention of Prussian Karl Otfried Müller and French Henri Ouvré) notion that the chorus is the lyrical residue of a more archaic ritual on the same basis that he criticizes Nietzsche’s theory of the origin of tragedy, arguing that what is needed is not a theory of *origins* but of tragedy as it *appears*:

Mas, una vez nacido el drama (esa resultante de lo que se ha llamado respectivamente, y con términos que aislados no se corresponden, pero que juntos, aunque difieran en profundidad filosófica, significan aparentemente lo mismo, la unión de lo dionisiaco y lo

apolíneo, la unión del principio lírico y del principio épico); una vez nacido el drama, que es un desprendimiento diverso, en conjunto, de lo lírico y de lo épico, el coro ¿subsistirá tan sólo para explicar el nacimiento, la existencia del drama? [...] Pero considerando la tragedia, no ya en sus fuentes (lo que servirá para reconstruir, filosóficamente explicado, el proceso que dio origen a la verdadera tragedia), sino como debieron considerarla los mismos griegos en la época central del teatro ateniense —con Esquilo, con Sófocles, con Eurípides—, la tragedia, en fin, según aparece y no según su proceso formativo; como el espíritu la contempla y no como deduce, razonadamente, que se formó; actual, ya no históricamente...<sup>77</sup>

Reyes's theoretical stance regarding the Greek chorus is another instance of poetry bypassing "previous explanation" and, again, this stance is less anti-intellectual than anti-scholastic. It displaces the "interest" in the tragic chorus from a question of historic or philosophical origins to a matter of immediate appearance – it is not a mode of inquiry that looks for what is *hidden* but for what is *in plain sight*. It is an *aesthetic* interpretation in the etymological sense of the word, concerned with the experience of the senses: what the eye sees, the ear hears and the body experiences. Indeed, Reyes imagines the chorus in Greek tragedy functioning as a kind of valve meant to regulate the spectator's accumulated impressions:

...el coro funciona rítmicamente, como un instrumento dinámico por donde estalla, en cantos, en gritos, en *ololugmoi*, el sedimento, la carga emocional precipitada en el fondo del ánimo por los episodios de la tragedia. Y por eso es fuerza que el coro esté presente a todos los acontecimientos y hasta a las revelaciones secretas: para conocer el drama y ponerse en contacto con él; para sentir, para emocionarse, y desahogar, a poco, *con desahogo lírico*, y cuando precisamente lo requiere el ánimo, la emoción, el *pathos* acumulado por las acciones dramáticas, la piedad, el terror. *Un instrumento oportuno y rítmico de desahogo lírico: esto es el coro de la tragedia helénica*<sup>78</sup>

Contrary to the modern psychological drama, classic Greek tragedy does not analyze its characters but, through the chorus, rejoices or suffers *along* with them. Instead of striving to represent a consciousness trapped within itself, the chorus works as release, allowing the emotional "sediment" of actions and secret events to "accumulate" and "discharge" when the "spirit" (*ánimo*)

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<sup>77</sup> Reyes, "Cuestiones estéticas," 219.

<sup>78</sup> Reyes, 42.

requires it. True: Reyes's conclusion seems scarcely original - mere Aristotelianism. But it constitutes another instance of Reyes's concern with the "release" of the "lyrical impulse" and the moment of poetic recognition in *Cuestiones estéticas*.

Since "Las cigarras del jardín" champions a new and peculiar form of classicism, something else might be said about Reyes's interpretation of the Greek chorus. Just as the *modernista* motif of a "reino interior" displaced the classic *locus amoenus* from the city's outskirts to the domestic interiors of 19<sup>th</sup>-century bourgeois life, so *catharsis* as a social, collective experience is re-signified by Reyes as an economy of the self:

Si así pensáis del coro, os aparecerá la tragedia como una completa representación del alma en su dinamismo pasional: nos empeñamos en luchas, padecemos, alcanzamos pequeños triunfos, alcanzamos triunfos decisivos; o nos doblegan las fuerzas de afuera, o las hacemos venir a nuestro servicio; y, de cuando en vez, nos apartamos un punto, medimos lo alcanzado, prevenimos lo venidero, nos compadecemos a nosotros mismos, cantamos nuestras propias victorias, y nos damos a la lamentación, a la exclamación, al *ololugmos*, al desahogo lírico, al llanto y al canto, como el coro de la tragedia helénica<sup>79</sup>

That in Greek tragedy the play between action, characters and the chorus could be taken to represent the "passional dynamism" of an individual self, is a notion Reyes certainly did not get from Aristotle. For Reyes, the chorus is there to signify, within the work itself, the moment of detachment, when "we distance ourselves a degree, measure what has been achieved, anticipate what's coming, take pity on ourselves, sing our victories, lament." This qualitative division is analogous to what I've called Reyes's Law of the Father, a particular distinction between the world of action and that of poetry, in which the latter is conceived as the performance of *surplus* or *excess* derived from the former. The chorus provides "lyric release" to the emotional "sentiments" produced by the tragedy's action in the same way that, at the end of the day, one retires to the domestic studio and the "reino interior" to produce poetic "surplus." In "Las cigarras del jardín,"

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<sup>79</sup> Reyes, 43.

Reyes defines this therapeutic function of poetry as part of “being’s hygiene,” *la higiene del ser*. We must consider this definition as both obscuring *and* revealing – through his “psychological” interpretation of “surplus,” Reyes mystifies (and through this mystification actually reveals) the social conditions necessary for the expenditure of culture. It is not a coincidence that church bells ring in the background of this last dialogue, signaling that it is a *holy-day – feria* – a festive time qualitatively distinct from the time of work.<sup>80</sup>

As a “lyric release” demanding no explanation, Valdés’s dream breaks the analytic loop. The narration itself is quite complex, for it happens at two different levels, a dream within a dream. In the deepest dream, Valdés finds himself outside a fabulous fortress: “...soñé que soñaba un alcázar de maravillosa construcción, de varios y confundidos estilos, rico de *vitrales* historiados. Figuras entecas de santos y largos rostros de mujeres se miraban, por transparencia, en las vidrieras; pues la luz interior del alcázar era más intensa que la exterior.”<sup>81</sup> This image, of course, takes us back to the *modernistas*’ formulation of the “interior realm,” given that *alcázar* (a Spanish word derived from Arabic, referring to a fortified palace or castle of Muslim provenance or influence) is the architectonic metaphor used by both Darío and Rodó in their particular variations of the motif. Furthermore, Valdés’s “*vitrales* historiados” directly echo the famous “Palabras liminares” in *Prosas profanas* (1896), where Darío writes:

Yo he dicho, en la misa rosa de mi juventud, mis antífonas, mis secuencias, mis profanas prosas. Tiempo y menos fatigas de alma y corazón me han hecho falta, para, como un buen monje artífice, hacer mis mayúsculas dignas de cada páginas. (A través de los fuegos divinos de las vidrieras historiadas, me río del viento que sopla afuera, del mal que pasa.) Tocad, campanas de oro, campanas de plata; tocad todos los días, llamándome a la fiesta en que brillan los ojos de fuego, y las rosas de las bocas sangran delicias únicas<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> On the relation between religious festivals, leisure and culture, see Josef Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952).

<sup>81</sup> Reyes, “Cuestiones estéticas,” 218.

<sup>82</sup> Ruben Darío, *Prosas* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1992), 36.

In this passage, Darío's "artificer-monk" is separated from the outside world ("the wind that blows outside, the evil that goes by") by the sacred images ("divine fire") of "storied windows," the kind one finds in churches or cathedrals and also in 19<sup>th</sup>-century bourgeoisie mansion.<sup>83</sup> In Valdés's dream, however, he is standing outside the *alcázar* and can only see the content of the storied windows – sickly saints and the long faces of women – by a strange inversion: light is stronger inside the *alcázar* than out. He wanders around the castle like a madman, mortified by the images of saints: "Yo era un loco y andaba por el pedregal, junto al alcázar. Los vidrios historiados me martirizaban, y me vino la idea de destruirlos todos. Particularmente me ofendía ver santos en un alcázar."<sup>84</sup> And so he does, showering the storied windows with stones. The scene is described in festive tone, a carnivalesque explosion of lights and sounds, the light inside the castle growing stronger as the "withered" saints and the long-faced women fall. At this point, literary language emerges in Valdés's narration: the crashing down of glass makes the castle sound "like a huge bell, or rather like a church with all of its bells ringing, or perhaps a huge music box, or a cage for birds made of glass;" the windowless castle appears as "a huge head opening one after the other the translucent lids of its hundred eyes."

The sound of crashing glass finally becomes so loud that Valdés wakes up – that is, wakes up to his immediate dream, "mi sueño *fundamental*." Again, it is a reverie made of images and sounds, but this time the violence has a different tone: "Y soñé que de mi boca, como en las figuras de la Biblia, salían agudos cuchillos a clavarse sobre el corazón de otro hombre. Y que el herido corazón soltaba pesadas gotas purpúreas que sonaban, sobre el pavimento lustroso, como los cristales del alcázar..." In dreamlike fashion, the situation is both different and the same vis-à-vis

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<sup>83</sup> For a brief and playful reflection on the relations between modern poetry and stained-glass windows, see Rafael Vargas contribution to "Mexico City's Stained-Glass Windows," *Artes de México*, no. 94 (2009): 75-76.

<sup>84</sup> Reyes, "Cuestiones estéticas," 219.

the previous dream-level. Now Valdés attacks not with stones but with words/razorblades; and not the *alcázar*, but a man's heart. The festive destruction turns into the thuds of heavy drops of blood on the asphalt. But there is still another turn of the screw: "Y hubo más. Porque aquel hombre, angustiado bajo mis cuchillos, súbitamente se arrancó del pecho su desgarrado corazón y lo lanzó al aire metamorfoseado en paloma. Desperté al cabo definitivamente, y oí que temblaba el aire con el canto de las campanas. Hoy es fiesta de la iglesia ¿verdad?"<sup>85</sup> The fundamental dream uncovers the possibility of pedagogical violence implicit in the "interior realm" motif. Indeed, Rodó had already sketched this possibility in *Ariel*: pedagogy implies breaching another subject's "interior realm." But Reyes's dialogical doubling of Prospero's monologue allows for a more dialectic understanding of the phenomenon, in so far as violence is always met with some kind of creative resistance. In this instance, the attacked subject rips out his own heart and throws it into the air, where it transforms into a dove.

For Reyes, as for Rodó, the possibility of recognition and association through poetic language implies an unavoidable quota of symbolic violence.<sup>86</sup> Poetry is effective (able to surpass analytic discourse and speak directly to the heart) only if, in Reyes terms, it makes another subject "weep or laugh"; that is, when it *breaches* into another's *alcázar* or "interior realm." Valdés compares this poetic power – words as razorblades – to the prophets of the Old Testament. There are other references to the Bible in *Cuestiones estéticas*; the essay on Mallarmé, as we saw, ends with an invocation of "biblical poetry," a language characterized by its "truly material push." But there is nothing particularly religious about Reyes's appeal. Around 1910, there probably was not a more thoroughly secular poet and thinker than him – so little interested in religion he could

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<sup>85</sup> Reyes, 220.

<sup>86</sup> Indeed, it could be said that all revolutionary education involves this type of "violence," a fact exemplified, for example, in the antagonism between 'folklore' and 'education' which forms one of the central tenets of Antonio Gramsci's pedagogical critique.

actually consider the Bible as an aesthetic artifice. It is the “material” quality of such a language that seduces Reyes’s fancy, its capacity to *move* and *remove* its listeners’ “interior realm” rather than to dissect it analytically, like Mallarmé did. In Valdés’s dream, the influence of his words/razorblades is in the end fruitful and the interlocutor’s bleeding heart becomes, biblically, a dove. In a very secular sense, Reyes’s religious imagery points towards a concrete social strategy, a language capable of working *through* the spectrum of social distinction. Whereas at its most extreme Mallarmé’s poetry could appeal only to psychologists or philosophers, biblical poetry comes to signify for Reyes a language that, through its “materiality,” can produce a wider - even popular - appeal.

As a solution to the matter of expression and recognition, Valdés’s dream produces as many questions as it answers. What is the precise meaning behind the *alcázar* and the destruction of its storied windows, full of sickly saints and long-faced women? Later in the dialogue, Valdés speaks of overcoming poetic *decadentismo* through a new classicism. But if the destruction of the storied windows is meant to signify the overcoming of a particular branch of modernism, then what exactly is the relation between this level of the dream and the next, *fundamental* level? And what should we make of the dream’s final image? No precise answer to these questions seems possible. Then again, that *is* the point of the dream-narration: the language of reverie displaces the need of analysis, declares it irrelevant. This is not to say, of course, that the poetic images of the dream have absolutely no relation to the actual plot of the dialogue. Rather, such images resist (they are produced *as* a form of resistance) translation into a more general language which could explain them – they resist *development*. Like the Greek chorus, they are pure *expression*, the release or discharge of emotive “sediment.” And as the chorus, a theory of these images is only legitimate when it takes into account that in them *essence* and *appearance* are one and the same; or rather

that the only *essential* thing about these images, if any, is that they *appear*, are made visible and audible. They are nothing but a *linguistic surface*: they hide nothing, or at least pretend not to do so. When Valdés seeks confirmation that “mi sueño entraña un sentido misterioso y que es un augurio feliz,” Castro’s answer formulates this position in a consciously foolish manner: “En verdad, yo no sé descifrar parábolas. Diré, sin embargo, que ahora comprendo las palabras griegas: el sueño viene de Zeus. En verdad tu sueño merece haber llegado a través de las puertas de cuerno (¿las de marfil?) que nos describen los antiguos.”<sup>87</sup> If nothing else may be said about it, it is still possible to recognize the dream’s divine provenance, the fact that it speaks a language with its own, divine rules.

From this point onward, the dialogue between Castro and Valdés resumes its true sense. This does not mean that an agreement has been reached. The reinstatement of the dialogic principle means simply the reestablishment of the relation between the interlocutors, and the relation has plenty of room for struggle and disagreement even if at the end a closure is achieved. Once the circle of *analysis* has been broken and conversation can move forward, the rest of the dialogue is devoted to setting *straight* the relations that made expression and recognition impossible in the first place: mainly, the inverted relation between life and school. The first step towards this end is taken by Valdés, who, regarding the possible meaning of his dream, embarks on a verbose distinction between “scientific” and “aesthetic” *pleasure*: “El gusto ruin por la semejanza y la correspondencia perfectas entre la alegoría y su aplicación no es placer artístico. Este desahogo, casi fisiológico [...] tiene gran semejanza con el placer matemático de la demostración [...] lo que toma, en arte, caracteres científicos, pierde la distinción y las particularidades excelencias de la

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<sup>87</sup> Reyes, “Cuestiones estéticas,” 134



entidad estética.”<sup>88</sup> Again, poetry and art are endowed with a particular distinction capable of overcoming specialized languages. The problem with this argument, as Castro soon notices, is that poetic language – allegory, parable, metaphor, analogy – is an essential part of the academic disciplines it seeks to transcend: “¿O vas a decirme tú también, como hizo una vez cierto amigo, que Platón no es filósofo porque, para expresarse, usa del procedimiento infantil de la metáfora?”<sup>89</sup> It is at this point that the relation between school and life is set straight. As a defense of Plato’s philosophical legitimacy, Valdés makes a distinction between “old” and “new” metaphors:

Cierto que las metáforas suelen dañar los pensamientos, pero nunca en los escritos de los antiguos. Perjudican, por ejemplo, en los libros de ciertos sociólogos “organicistas” que yo me sé, pero no en Platón, no en los filósofos de la antigüedad, en quienes la metáfora sirve nada menos que para alcanzar, con la filosofía, el verdadero corazón del mundo, la verdadera ley de la vida, verificable en todos los instantes y sobre todas las cosas. Ésta es la fuerza de la antigua filosofía: que ha tomado el ritmo de la vida y se desarrolla a su lado y paralelamente, y no mata su dinamismo: al paso que las teorías de los modernos son con frecuencia sólo realizables en el pensamiento y de un modo lógico o formal. La vieja metáfora creó las bases de todas las filosofías respetables pensadas por los hombres, y la nueva metáfora nos trae preocupadísimos en averiguar cuáles son las arterias o cuáles los nervios de las ciudades<sup>90</sup>

Classical philosophy is here an example of an academic language that is born out of the “rhythm of life” and develops “alongside” its “dynamism,” rather than “stifling” the vital impulse. If it is indeed a specialized language, its metaphors do not presuppose the analytic delimitation of its object, and herein lies its universal power. In this, it resembles poetry. On the other hand, “new” metaphors – like the ones produced by sociologists – are mere intellectual figures, only discernible through their logic form. Thus, *academy* can certainly be the ground for true poetic expression, but only in so far as it serves the totality signified by “life” and does not impose on it the analytic principle of the division of disciplines.

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<sup>88</sup> Reyes, 135

<sup>89</sup> Reyes, 137.

<sup>90</sup> Reyes, 137-138.

This apparent resolution, however, only takes the two friends back to the beginning of their conversation. As Castro now confesses, the cause for his idleness and unproductiveness pre-dated the initial encounter with Valdés in his library. This original “skepticism” is related to the material and social conditions necessary for the poetic expression of “life.” For poetic expression is the performance of a *surplus* and thus presupposes a concrete *oikonomia*:

Y bien: en otros años, cuando yo leía los poetas de la antigüedad, anhelé volcar como ellos toda mi vida en los versos y, de todas las épocas y entre todos los escritores, siempre escogía para mi más íntimo deleite a aquellos que saben traer a la obra estética el caudal de todas las horas y la belleza de los diarios sucesos [...] ¿Qué habré de decir de los antiguos? Tanto como yo los conoces y sabes lo sinceros que son en arte y cuán fácilmente traían la vida a los versos y a los poemas. Pues nadie ha logrado como ellos dignificar, para la poesía, los usos diarios de la casa y de la ciudad.<sup>91</sup>

The totality signified by “life” – the *oikonomia* of “life” as Reyes conceives it – thus refers to concrete social spaces, or rather to two concrete and interrelated social orders: city and home. The city understood as a complex *exterior*, dangerous and seducing at the same time, that could not be apprehended by analysis’ sociological metaphors (“the streets’ nerves and arteries”); home as the *interior* domain, not only as intimacy *lived*, but as intimacy *created* (Castro’s and Reyes’s libraries). Yet both orders could be harmoniously reconciled, as we have seen, through the particular *oikonomia* established by Reyes’s Law of the Father. Thus, for “life” to be expressed poetically as the process of *harmony* and *excess*, a concrete historical and institutional situation (signified by the domestic relation between work and culture, a domestic relation sublimated into civic order) is necessary. The cause of Castro’s “skepticism” and “doubts” towards the praxis of poetry resides in a historical dislocation between this notion of poetry as *surplus* and the historical conditions of production of the two friends: “Castro, tienes razón. Quien tratase hoy de ser clásico en ese vigoroso sentido, es decir, aprovechando la vida y la civilización actuales, no sé cómo se

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<sup>91</sup> Reyes, 138-139.

las arreglaría.” The true origin of Castro’s poetic despair is the impossibility of becoming a classic. This impossibility is registered as a social condition, a national (and academic) *oikonomia* in which the order of things does not translate into the poetic expenditure of culture but actually impedes it.

Valdés’s final teaching gets to the heart of “Tres diálogos” (aesthetic) matter. For his final speech, he is once again Socrates. Now, however, the figure of the teacher is rehabilitated as a source of energy and life: “Recuerda que hoy cantan las cigarras dentro de mi alma.” His teachings regarding the possibility of a new Humanism are worth quoting at length:

Pero escúchame: has dicho, en suma, que el fin de los escritores antiguos era vaciar en sus libros sus pensamientos, y su ser entero si podían. Es decir, que escogían como dedicación central la dedicación de escribir. Pues oye lo que te respondo: que escribir era para ellos nada más que una de las muchas formas de su actividad general; que no orientaban su vida hacia la literatura como hacia un rumbo diverso y aun opuesto de las demás, según hoy queremos entenderlo los bárbaros; que su literatura y su gusto por escribir nacían de suyo, no forzada sino naturalmente, no con pena de tarea o menester, sino con delicia de desahogo espontáneo, como una consecuencia de estar viviendo o de haber vivido mucho, ya para recordar los muchos viajes y las muchas experiencias humanas, ya para apacentar un exceso de energía natural no saturada aún por las otras actividades políticas o privadas.<sup>92</sup>

The antonym of “classicism” in this passage (as in the whole dialogue) is not another epochal denomination such as “romanticism,” “baroque” or even “modern.” It is “professional.” Only a non-professionalized *locus* of writing, Valdés tells Castro, makes literary classicism possible – i.e., metaphors capable of capturing life as “totality” and “dynamism.” The professional *locus* transforms poetry into the object of life rather than the other way around. Valdés fully impersonates Socrates when he quotes Plato’s *Phaedrus*: “Los hombres que se dan por entero en sus libros, los que entregan a los libros todo su saber, dan a luz hijos indefensos y son insensatos; pero el sabio, cuyas palabras y cuyos discursos superan siempre lo que escribe, ése da a luz hijos a quienes podrá socorrer en todo evento, porque escribir es, para el sabio, un modo de diversión durante la vida: el

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<sup>92</sup> Reyes, 140-141.

más alto sin disputa.” Unlike Mallarmé, who had radically distinguished written poetic praxis from the corrupted realm of the *spoken*, Valdés/Socrates’ fertile *pater* is immediately present through his spoken word. Indeed, fertility means but the primacy of the pater/teacher’s *voice* over the barren discipline of writing. Indeed, those whose lives are dedicated to writing books, “tras de depositar sus semillas en un agua negra, irá a sembrarlas con la pluma en palabras incapaces de defenderse por sí, incapaces de enseñar suficientemente la verdad.”<sup>93</sup> A piece of advice enunciated towards the end of the dialogue gives this impotent figure a name and nicely summarizes Valdés’s teachings: “¿Quieres asuntos para tus versos? Enriquece y dignifica tu vida: *no seas literato*.”<sup>94</sup>

Valdés thus formulates classicism both as a space (the domestic library) and as a time (the leisurely expenditure of culture) of linguistic production outside the analytic limits of specialized knowledge (the space and time of schools); he advances a new *locus amoenus* which is both material and symbolic. The metaphor for this *locus amoenus* is the garden, where the two friends reconcile. In Platonic dialogues, conversation often takes place *outside* the *polis*’ walls - not in the public plazas but under the shadows of trees, near flowers and rivers. The final scene of the dialogue stages a return to this open space: “¿Qué mucho si me encuentras locuaz? ¿No estoy respirando el aire de tu jardín? ¿No me halaga la vista el verde, grato siempre a mi temperamento nervioso? Tu jardín ¿no huele a yerba y a humedad? Pues hay en él abundante agua, rumor y frescura...” But this return is only possible by way of the library and the salon. Indeed, the garden is only *outside* in relation to them. As a space *within* the symbolic *oikonomia* traced by Reyes in “Tres diálogos,” the garden overcomes scholarly *ennui* and idleness through its sheer, superficial materiality. Like Valdés’s dream, it is a space of immediacy - not a map for hidden meanings but

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<sup>93</sup> Reyes, 141.

<sup>94</sup> Reyes, 143.

a material reality existing for the poet's senses. It hides nothing in a metaphysical sense; and yet, it is still the result and emblem of domestic order, the material evidence of the "Olympian" principle that (asymmetrically) reconciles leisure and work. Like a poem, the garden is cultivated to be enjoyed and is less a duty than a form of free play, a space in which fantasy and order commingle. And, like a poem, the garden allows, through human labor, for the leisurely contemplation of material reality as spectacle: an object existing *for* human sense and thought, as Marx wrote.<sup>95</sup> The garden's flowers bloom thanks to household's division of labor.

As a conclusion to "Tres diálogos," Reyes proposes a notion of classic poetry as part of *la higiene del ser* that is explicitly opposed to *decadent* poetics. As I have argued, this opposition is less a matter of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century pseudo-physiology than of distinguishing between poetry as *surplus* and poetry as *work*. Rather than providing a space for *expression* as *release* – "desahogos, salidas, que movilizan los sedimentos morbosos, o los gérmenes excesivos, ya materiales, ya sentimentales, que el sabor del mundo y su contacto van depositando en nosotros" – the poetics of *decadentism* and its obsession with form represent for Valdés an erroneous circuit of production between work and culture:

Quando se acabó el vivir romántico y ya no hubo tanta agitación exterior, nacieron escuelas en que la necesidad de *hacer* se tradujo, para la literatura, en complicación de forma: éste es el secreto del *decadentismo*. Los hombres hallan la razón de su vida en realizar fines, o, en otra forma menos moral pero más psicológica, en destruir obstáculos. O se corre una peligrosa aventura o, si ya la vida es monótona, se inventa, para compensarse, una audacia en literatura: un soneto a *las vocales*, un soneto sin puntuación, un soneto sin ilación.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> "The eye has become a *human eye*, just as its *object* has become a social, *human* object – an object made by man for man. The *senses* have therefore become directly in their practice *theoreticians* [...] Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man's essential being is the richness of subjective *human* sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form – in short, *senses* capable of human gratification, senses affirming themselves as essential powers of *man*) either cultivated or brought into being. For not only the five senses but also the so-called mental senses, the practical senses (will, love, etc.), in a word, *human* sense, the human nature of the senses, comes to be by virtue of *its* object, by virtue of *humanized* nature. The *forming* of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present" *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. by Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 87.

<sup>96</sup> Reyes, "Cuestiones estéticas," 142.

Here Valdés plays with educational institutions as well as with poetic groups united under certain principles (Parnasianism, Symbolism, etc.). In both cases, however, what is implied is the same: when the “need to do” is not realized in “action” it invades the realm of “expression.” Of course, having poetry as an object of work, as a profession, is essentially incompatible with its function as the enjoyment of *surplus* and its reenactment of the leisurely moment of intellectual and artistic detachment. The nonsensical results of circuit of production - sonnets dedicated to “vowels, or with no punctuation or no link” - are what Valdés/Socrates describe as “helpless” children, the product of planting one’s “seed” in “dark waters” rather than in the garden of “life.”

To conclude, let us remark that the professionalization of poetic praxis was conceived by the young Reyes as no less than a symbolic castration: the loss of vital plenitude, an amputation of the reproductive center of the body. Indeed, José Enrique Rodó had described in *Ariel* the “mutilated man” - a kind of subject produced at institutions of higher education, learned at one thing yet monstrously inept at every other - as the main obstacle to the construction of the “spiritual” community. According to Reyes, what the subject lost through this “mutilation” was the potency and plenitude of literary language, the phallic function of organizing the symbolic order through the signifier, to use Jacques Lacan’s terms. At the level of the symbolic, to lose the capacity for *reproduction* is to lose the capacity for *communication* – literary language is no longer able to penetrate the forbidden *alcázar*. Castration thus *isolates, silences* – it removes the subject from the erotic game of symbolic recognition. This, as we can now see, is *Cuestiones estéticas* fundamental concern – from Reyes’s deliberations on Mallarmé’s and Valdés’s poetic sterility to his Humanist conception of the fertile Teacher/Father, from his accusations of “scholasticism” to his demands for the “release” of the “lyric impulse,” the fear of symbolic castration through professionalization and the desire for universal recognition through literary language are

pervasive. Humanism represented for the young Reyes – the Reyes that goes from “[e]l *niño brillante* al hombre mediano” as the author described his younger self years later in a letter to Enrique Díez Canedo, before adding: “Gran respeto se le debe al niño” – the sound of a reconstituted voice and the image of a body made whole, the reverse and denial of the symbolic fragmentation that occurred at national institutions of higher education.

### CHAPTER III. THE MEXICAN WASTELAND: EDUCATION, WORK AND AESTHETICS

#### IN JOSÉ VASCONCELOS'S *ULISES CRIOLLO*

“Pero no, yo me echo vorazmente sobre el pasado pensando en el futuro, en cómo será la forma de estos recuerdos”

Felisberto Hernández, *En los tiempos de Clemente Colling*

#### *I. The Missing Bridegroom: Education, Cultural Capital and the Aesthetic Subject*

If there was one character in Mexican intellectual life ready to respond to *Ariel's* messianic calling, that was José Vasconcelos. Mexican culture and politics have never witnessed such an enthusiasm. Prospero, in José Enrique Rodó's magisterial text, demanded a generation of young men who would give back “a la vida un sentido ideal, un grande entusiasmo; en las que sea un poder el sentimiento; en las que una vigorosa resurrección de las energías de la voluntad ahuyente, con heroico clamor, del fondo de las almas, todas las cobardías morales que se nutren a los pechos de la decepción y de la duda.” It was Vasconcelos who first raised his hand, the advanced pupil in the master's study. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, Vasconcelos was a successful lawyer, a distinguished member of the intellectual avant-garde, the editor of an underground newspaper critical of the Díaz regime, a political conspirator, advisor to Madero, victim of political persecution, an exile, a womanizer, one of many “Teachers” (*Maestros*) of Latin-American youths, Minister of Education and, in 1929, presidential candidate. During those years, he best enacted the renewal of energies and the will to action that Prospero/Rodó desired, and thus tirelessly proclaimed the good news of cultural redemption.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For an exhaustive description of Vasconcelos's tenure as Minister of Education, see Claude Fell, *José Vasconcelos, los años del aguila, 1920-1925* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1989).



By the late 1930's, however, Vasconcelos's inextinguishable energy had turned into inextinguishable anger. After the election of '29, which he knew to be a fraud from the start, Vasconcelos went into exile once again and called for a popular uprising in the name of democracy. He expected history to repeat itself – as the people had risen up for Madero they would now rise for him. But Vasconcelos misread (or pretended to misread) the popular involvement of characters like Villa in Madero's liberal uprising and, most importantly, his own political power. There was of course no uprising; Vasconcelos was simply, meaninglessly in exile, shunned from the political life of the nation.<sup>2</sup> The next years were of resentment and writing, of resentment fueling writing and writing shaping one of the best embodiments of resentment in Mexican letters. His memoirs – four abundant volumes written and published between 1935 and 1939 under the general title of *Ulises Criollo* – are the remarkable product of this convoluted dynamic.<sup>3</sup>

In the memoirs, Vasconcelos conflated his political failure with the failure of *arielismo*. In the opening section of his lecture, Prospero had painted to his students a desolate landscape of doubt and hesitation, the product of the traumatic experience of 1898. He begged them,

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<sup>2</sup> For the standard account of the 1929 presidential election see John Skirius, *José Vasconcelos y la cruzada de 1929* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1978). A decade ago, Javier García Diego attempted to dispel the “myth” of the stolen election. His logic, however, is convoluted: “lo cierto es que las enormes diferencias entre el número de ciudadanos cautivados por él y el número de gente involucrada de una u otra manera con el régimen de la Revolución hacía innecesario falsear los resultados...Lo que sucedió es que se modificó el marcador pero no se alteró el resultado. Con todo, la violencia habida y las modificaciones en los números finales han permitido cuestionar moralmente las elecciones de 1929. En síntesis, debe considerárseles inequitativas y sucias, pero no torcidas o fraudulentas, en tanto que el resultado final no fue alterado en esencia.” See “La campaña de 1929: el mito del fraude,” in *Relatos e historias en México* (Mexico City: Editorial Raíces, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> *Ulises Criollo* is the title of the autobiography's first volume, published in 1935. It was followed by *La tormenta* (1936), *El desastre* (1938) and *El proconsulado* (1939). There are two later autobiographical volumes, *El ocaso de mi vida* (1957) and *La Flama* (1959), but they share little similarities with the *Ulises Criollo* project besides certain generic conventions. It is important, rather, to note that the writing and publishing of the *Ulises Criollo* cycle coincides with two other ambitious works: *De Robinsón a Odiseo*, from 1935, in which Vasconcelos explained at length the pedagogic philosophy he sought to apply as Minister of Education from 1921 to 1924; as well as the *Aesthetics*, from 1936, in which he formulated the theoretical principles of his philosophy of art. These three works – autobiography, pedagogy, and the theory of art – are intricately related as variations of a single preoccupation with the way subjects are produced (in-formed) by culture and its institutions. In what follows, all quotes belong to the Fondo de Cultura Económica's two volume edition of the *Ulises Criollo* cycle: José Vasconcelos, *Memorias* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982).

nonetheless, not to fall prey to despair. For even if there are generations destined by history to banality, they must never lose faith that, sooner or later, a new *ideal* will emerge. This is illustrated by Prospero with an eerie parable borrowed from one of Rodo's favorite thinkers, French philosopher Jean-Marie Guyau. In the parable, a woman wakes up every morning thinking it is her wedding day. She goes through all the preparations and beautifully attired waits for her beloved, only to fall into melancholy at night after the groom failed to arrive. The next morning, however, with undiminished enthusiasm, the woman wakes up and goes through the entire process again. Such are the generations of men, Prospero illustrates, which are to await like a bride for the birth of a new ideal once the old one has died. And, like in the biblical story, one can never be sure when the groom might arrive.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This is indeed the perfect moment for a word on the question of gender and *arielismo*. This inquiry, however, must first be referred to the wider phenomenon of the emergence of national systems of education during the last three decades of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th. In the Mexican case, an important effort towards a centralized, state-funded system of education was begun in 1867 through the political and cultural work of prominent positivist Gabino Barreda. The *Ley Orgánica de Instrucción Pública en el Distrito Federal* of 1867 established a total of four public schools of elementary education, three for men and one for women. At this level, the unequal distribution of the school's knowledge and skills through a distinction of biological sex is already clear. Less math, no science, training in "labores manuales" and technical knowledge of the machines needed for them, in the case of the girls; the rudiments of different sciences and in practical mechanics, for boys. The common culture distributed for both involved language (grammar, reading, writing) and "rudimentos de historia y geografía, especialmente de México." If the educational process were to stop after the elementary level, boys could go to a factory or work as minor clerks, girls could do very basic writing jobs and had some notions of domestic obligations and crafts. At the secondary level of education, the division of labour was more complex: one institution for "personas del sexo femenino;" one institute of "estudios preparatorios," the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, for those who would go on to become Doctors, Lawyers or Engineer; and fourteen pre-professional schools for different practices (jurisprudence, pharmacy, veterinary, fine arts and others), amongst which the Normal school, for the production of teachers, was particularly important. The school for "persons of the female sex" included this time algebra and geometry and such heterogeneous subjects as: "teneduría de libros, medicina, higiene y economía doméstica, deberes de las mujeres en sociedad, idem de la madre con relación a la familia y al Estado, dibujo lineal, de figura y ornato, francés, inglés, italiano, música, labores manuales, artes y oficios que se puedan ejercer por mujeres, nociones de horticultura y jardinería, métodos de enseñanza comparados." See Gabino Barreda, *Ley Orgánica de Instrucción Pública en el Distrito Federal 1867-1967* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1967). Although there was no formal exclusion of women from the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria and the houses of professional studies, the instruction they had previously received made it much harder for them to pass the admission exams, a kind of Catch-22 within the public education system. It wasn't until the 1880's that a woman, Matilde Montoya, was admitted to the Nacional Preparatoria and later received her degree as a medical doctor. It was also around that time, 1888 and 1889, that the Escuela Normal became a predominantly feminine institution. For a history of public educational institutions in Mexico at the turn of the century, see Mílada Bazant, *Historia de la educación durante el porfiriato* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1993). This complex pedagogical situation, which gave women limited access to spheres previously closed to them, at the same time that it unequally distributed knowledges and skills on the basis of essentialized biological sex, is

Vasconcelos thought the groom had arrived for the first time in 1909, in the figure of Francisco I. Madero, the head of a prominent liberal family from the north of Mexico who had studied in Europe and the United States. Madero wanted to replace the military in power for an illustrated, civil government and conceived his political action as the spiritual-spiritistic redemption of the nation.<sup>5</sup> After Madero was shot alongside Vice President José María Pino Suárez, Vasconcelos saw his messianic hopes dissolved into continual warfare. The second time Vasconcelos thought the groom had arrived was during the 1920's. This time the groom was Vasconcelos himself, first as Minister of Education under the government of general Álvaro Obregón and then as presidential candidate. Of course, Vasconcelos's sense of greatness far precedes this two moments. They represented, however, the concrete situations in which his messianic drive and his institutional power came closer. In both instances, Vasconcelos preached about a national redemption to be achieved through the fine and popular arts; in both instances, his aesthetic utopia was defeated by the military's realpolitik.

Political and cultural failure thus were for Vasconcelos one and the same thing. In 1939, he wrote in the last pages of his memoirs: "Pues ¿en dónde están las figuras que pudiéramos poner al lado de un Whitman, un Poe, un Emerson, un William James? Y, sin embargo, nos creemos

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always in the background of *arielismo*, in Mexico as well as in many other countries. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that as a particular pedagogic ideology, *arielismo* faced from its beginning the accusation that it was too effeminate. Prospero himself had to defend his project of aesthetic education from this critique: "En efecto: todo lo que tienda a suavizar los contornos del carácter social y las costumbres; a aguzar el sentido de la belleza; a hacer del gusto una delicada impresionabilidad del espíritu y de la gracia una forma universal de la actividad, equivale, para el criterio de muchos devotos de lo severo o de lo útil, a menoscabar el temple varonil y heroico de las sociedades, por una parte, su capacidad utilitaria o positiva, por la otra." This is not too surprising, when we consider that Prospero went around telling stories about young men being like brides waiting for their husband. In the third section of this chapter, I explore notions of gender, desire and aesthetics in Vasconcelos's memoirs.

<sup>5</sup> The similarities between Madero's and Vasconcelos's messianisms should not be overstressed, however. The most subtle studies on the relations between Vasconcelos's spirituality and his political action are still Enrique Krauze's. For Krauze, Vasconcelos indeed took advantage of Madero's spiritual discourse, all the while trying to blur its relation to spiritism. For a Catholic like Vasconcelos, Madero's spiritism was a kind of embarrassment, something akin to bad taste in the realm of religion. See Enrique Krauze, *Redentores: ideas y poder en América Latina* (Barcelona: Debate, 2011). See also his "Pasión y contemplación en Vasconcelos," included in *Ulises Criollo*, critical edition by Claude Fell (Nantere: Universidad de Costa Rica, 2000).

hijos predilectos del espíritu, y José Enrique Rodó, que era un provinciano de genio retórico, nos representó Ariel en lucha con Calibán. ¿Dónde está la gran literatura que justifique el abolengo de *Ariel*?”<sup>6</sup> This is a shocking moment of doubt, a veritable fissure within the tight weave of the *latinoamericanismo* preached by Rodó and his disciples - the Latin-American “spirit” looks in the mirror and finds there the *other* it imagined for itself. Not only that, it finds itself in the *other* side of the mirror: the US is actually what it imagined itself to be, an autonomous agent in “universal” culture. In Vasconcelos’s memoirs, alongside the failure of great men of action to transform the nation into the shape of an ideal, there is the absence of great men of letters, *classics* to be held against competing powers in the battle for cultural prestige. There is no better weapon against the insolence of foreigners than a noble tradition, Vasconcelos meaningfully wrote in his memoirs.<sup>7</sup>

Why did the groom fail to arrive? This question drives the narrative of the memoirs in a fundamental way. There is, of course, a great amount of Vasconcelos’s insurmountable narcissism in the question. Why didn’t Mexico recognize, first Madero and then me, as the saviors they

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<sup>6</sup> José Vasconcelos, *Memorias II* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982), 992.

<sup>7</sup> This struggle for *classicism*, as it were, should not be taken as a sign of Vasconcelos sub-altern, colonial position. Rather, it describes a real battle for cultural prestige in the international market of cultural goods. Vasconcelos, like Rodó, envisioned the cultural struggle against the US not only as the production of an autonomous national *difference*, but also as a competition to appropriate the “high” cultural works and symbols of the Old world. In this, they were very much part of the *modernista* cultural politics discussed by Gerard Aching in *The Politics of Spanish American Modernismo*: “If resistance to colonizers forms one of the principal characteristics of a postcolonial subjectivity, what can be said about the *modernistas*’ stated appreciation for Europe’s metropolitan cultures and art?” (154). For Aching, it would be a strategic and intellectual error to reduce all forms of cultural resistance to the absolute rejection of the colonizer’s culture and tongue - an error not unlike the one that claims that “European” theory applied to the Americas is a kind of neocolonialism, instead of exploring the ways in which such theory is de-territorialized and creatively appropriated by other countries or groups. In the case of the *modernistas*, “their concern [...] was not to break with European Culture but to supplement it by representing Spanish America as the time and place of Europe’s cultural posterity. This cultural *rapprochement* with the continent that colonized the Americas can be considered an attempt to join a global order (hegemony) as a full and equal participant, and from this perspective, it is a bold response to a colonial past.” This *rapprochement* is interpreted in terms of a transnational class alliance and the production of a Spanish American “patrimonio común.” Aching’s view expresses not only a sound historical position, but a conscious academic strategy for dealing with the cultural works of a colonial past or a post-colonial present: “So long as the works of past and present literary movements can be used (and reused) to politicize the reading public, it behooves the critic to go beyond the question of the author’s ‘real intent.’” See *The Politics of Spanish-American Modernismo: By Exquisite Design* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 144-159.

needed? would be the cynical, though not completely mistaken way of reformulating the question. Here, however, I intend to approach Vasconcelos's memoirs as the account of one of modernity's most enduring promises: that of social harmony through aesthetic education.<sup>8</sup> The goal of this *aesthetic* education, to be achieved (in the case of Rodó and Vasconcelos) by the development of a centralized, nationwide, state-funded system of education, was the formation of a certain kind of subject which henceforth I will call the *aesthetic* subject. Such a subject involved developing the self's "universality," a quality understood quite mundanely as the overcoming of professionalization and specialized knowledge through literature and the arts. If other disciplines were there to turn citizens into professionals, culture was there to provide the common ground out of which specialization could take place. If other subjects were actually *disciplines*, literature and the arts were to function as a paradoxical *undisciplined* school subject – a *meta-specialty*, as Julio Ramos argued.<sup>10</sup> This subject was not only formed through its relation to cultural capital, but

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<sup>8</sup> For important academic reformulations of "aesthetic education" in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, see Jacques Rancière, *The politics of aesthetics: the distribution of the sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004) and Gayatri Spivak, *An aesthetic education in the era of globalization* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> See Julio Ramos, *Desencuentros de la modernidad en América Latina: Literatura y política en el siglo XIX* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989), 202-228. It should be noted that the work of Antonio Gramsci is very important for Ramos' discussion of Latin-American uneven modernity, especially as they provide a framework to understand the clash between "traditional" and "organic" intellectuals. However, regarding the definition of literature as a *meta-specialization*, it is surprising that Ramos does not refer to Gramsci's writing on the organization of culture and the principle of education. Gramsci - like Alfonso Reyes, Pedro Henríquez Ureña and José Vasconcelos, and precisely around the same time - was an enemy of early professionalization and the proliferation of technical schools which, if left unchecked, could only crystalize existing social differences into labour and professional differences. Against such a school, Gramsci defended a "common" education in which literary culture would work as a countersubject, with the function of distributing amongst students a "general" (un-specialized) kind of knowledge, as well as what he called the *techniques of government* by which every citizen, regardless of occupation or profession, could become part of the State (or its intelligent critic). In the "traditional" curriculum (Gramsci refers here to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian *liceo*) this educational function was fulfilled by the study of Graeco-Latin grammar, history and literature. Gramsci was not averse to this tradition yet was conscious that at any moment it could become obsolete or could not fulfill the particular function demanded from it. However, the rejection of Graeco-Latin tradition only meant that a new curricular space with the same functions (distribution of a general culture and the *techniques of government*) would have to be defined. All pedagogical projects that rejected the need for this function were, for Gramsci, reactionary, since they would lead to the creation of a new caste society based on labor distinctions. This line of thinking was developed by Gramsci as a critique of Giovanni Gentile's 1923 pedagogical reform of Italian education. See Antonio Gramsci, "The Organisation of Education and Culture" and "In Search of the Educational Principle" in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

became itself the source of cultural prestige – cultural capital was incarnated in the body of the aesthetic subject and its life acquired a value analogous to that of the work of art. Thus, the school was an ambiguous institution, at once the space in which students were mutilated by being turned into professionals yet also a crucial social locus for the possibility of the aesthetic subject to reproduce socially. Through the narration of his own life, Vasconcelos pondered over the material and institutional conditions that made such a subject possible. Rather than the transparent expression of the aesthetic subject, the memoirs are here understood as the written traces of a desire to achieve the “universality” required for aesthetic recognition and the production of cultural prestige.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> With its claim to “face value” (using Sylvia Molloy’s felicitous turn of phrase), autobiography seems like the perfect genre to actualize in writing Vasconcelos’s desire for the aesthetic subject, which constitutes the core of his politics. And, in a sense, everything he wrote was autobiographical. But this autobiographical bent, I would suggest, could in turn be read as an index of the wider essayistic praxis of the Spanish Americas, what at the beginning of the last century Rodó defined as “our modern literature of ideas.” This is not to say that *Ulises Criollo* is an essay pretending to be an autobiography, but that the fundamental characteristic of both genres is the refusal of literary specialization. They describe, fictionalize, theorize, digress, preach, remember, invent, suggest, teach, seduce. Its languages and composition are a constant and willed challenge to notions of literary purity. In this, they enact and interpellate an “un-specialized” literary subject. Both the essay and the autobiography make a claim to “life” (face value) against the “artificiality” of specialized languages and they expose the authors’ (as well as address the readers) “interior realm.” For long, Vasconcelos’s memories have indeed presented its readers with the challenge of defining its literary genre. Is it actually an adventure novel, like José Joaquín Blanco suggests in *Se llamaba Vasconcelos: una evocación crítica* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1977)? Is it a literary mural, analogous to the ones painted by Rivera and company in the 1920s, “an attempt to infuse a dead rhetoric of messianic nationalism with new life, recycling it on the level of personal myth,” as Molloy pictures it in “First memories, first myths: Vasconcelos’s *Ulises Criollo*”? Is it all a bit of national gossip and the chance to take some personal shots, as most of Vasconcelos’s contemporaries claimed at the time of its publication? It is actually all of the previous, and then some. The crucial fact here is that, for Vasconcelos, autobiographical writing consisted precisely in the refusal of literary specialization. Clear cut distinctions between history, fiction, memory, theory and gossip were all collapsed into the category of “life.” Thus, for “life” to acquire a value analogous to a work of art did not mean to practice an “art of living:” it was no dandyism. It rather meant that, through the exercise of writing, Vasconcelos sought to weave into a whole the fragments of self dispersed by the division of labor and the specialization of knowledges. The task was to *compose* the self. For a discussion on anti-specialization and the essay as a Latin-American literary praxis, see Julio Ramos, *Desencuentros*, “Masa, cultura, latinoamericanismo.” For an argument regarding the importance of *essaying* and the *essay* in conceptions of *literary modernity*, see Claire de Obaldia’s excellent *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). For important analyses on autobiographies produced throughout Latin-America in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries see the forementioned Molloy, *At Face Value: Autobiographical Writing in Spanish America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); *Intimidades: Los géneros autobiográficos y la literatura*, ed. Antonio Cajero Vázquez (San Luis Potosí: El Colegio de San Luis, 2012); *Retratos latino-americanos: a recordação letrada de intelectuais e artistas do século XX*, ed. Jorge Myers and Sergio Miceli (São Paulo: Edicoes Sesc São Paulo, 2019).

Thus, in *Ulises Criollo*, Vasconcelos situated the failure of *arielismo* both in the institutional context of the school and in the social praxis of professional life, rather than on the scientific racism prevalent in late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century.<sup>12</sup> It is one of the ironies of Vasconcelos's posthumous fame that today he is best remembered as the author of *La raza cósmica* (1925), a book composed during moments of spare time during an official period of travel through Brazil and Argentina. Furthermore, as Ilan Stavans has remarked, reading *La raza cósmica* has more and more meant reading "Mestizaje," the book's introductory essay in which Vasconcelos displays his famous (and infamous) notion regarding the messianic coming of a new race, the *mestizo*, which was to be the culmination of human racial evolution and the basis of a universal and harmonious society. Vasconcelos's intellectual activity has thus become synonymous with race, and the man himself one of the emblems of racial thinking in the Spanish-speaking Americas - the "prophet of race," according to Stavans, who rightly underlines with this formulation the millenarian elements present not only in Vasconcelos's racial thinking, but in his whole oeuvre.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In the following pages, I simply use the term "school" to refer to the various institutions and degrees (elementary, secondary, professional) education. I do this not only to avoid constant and awkward interruptions, but also because Vasconcelos took for granted that education should be a single, continuous, organic process, a principle he strove to implement as Minister of Education and that appears negatively in the autobiography as a critique of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century educational institutions. Furthermore, the development of a centralized, nation-wide system of education in Mexico from the 1920s onward was, I would argue, extremely successful, opening up the possibility to an "organic" critic of the "school" as an integral, unified process.

<sup>13</sup> Ilan Stavans, *Jose Vasconcelos: The Prophet of Race* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), XII. For a recent reformulation of Vasconcelos as a "prophet" of race, see Joshua Lund, "Mestizaje and Postrevolutionary Malaise: Vasconcelos and Azuela" in *The Impure Imagination: Toward a Critical Hybridity in Latin-American Writing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). There, Lund defines Vasconcelos notion of Latin-America as the site of the "end of history" as the "end of race." In a critical move that separates millenarism and race, Ignacio Sánchez Prado keeps only the millenarism in "El mestizaje en el corazón de la utopía: la raza cósmica entre Aztlán y América Latina," an effort to recuperate the "utopian gesture" implicit in Vasconcelos's notions of *mestizaje* and *la raza cósmica*. On his part, Diego A. von Vacano situates the notion of *la raza cósmica* in a Latin-American discursive tradition on "race" and "synthesis," to which Vasconcelos is the "aesthetic" variant (the other elements in Vacano's genealogy are Bartolome de las Casas, Simón Bolívar and Laureano Vallenilla Lanz). See "José Vasconcelos Aesthetic Synthesis of Race," in *The Color of Citizenship: Race, Modernity and Latin American/Hispanic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). What I intend to do here is to read, in *Ulises Criollo*, issues of *cultural difference* (nationality, race, genre, citizenship, profession) as they appear in Vasconcelos's narration of the school, that is, as they are institutionally produced through the school. And I am especially interested in the role literature played in such a process. The choice to focus on the autobiography is already telling. Most academics that approach Vasconcelos's "theorizations" on race through *La raza cósmica* miss the fact that the Latin-American essayistic praxis

Vasconcelos was indeed always haunted by the thought that, in the struggle for cultural recognition, biological race and the process of mestizaje could prove a deciding factor, an ultimate *difference* beyond which there was no cultural understanding. And, while the memoirs certainly show their share of biological anxiety, they offer at the same time an imaginative and acute analysis of national institutions of education as the sites in which such cultural *differences* are produced and resolved - or left unresolved. Read in this way, what Vasconcelos's memoirs narrate are 1) the insufficiencies of late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Mexican education institutions to produce the aesthetic subject (sections II and III of this chapter); 2) a critique of mechanical work and professional life as incommensurable with the *arielista* ideal of an integral, well-rounded individual (section IV); and 3) the struggle to actualize the "universality" of the aesthetic subject in a particular language, that is, to make it the object of an autobiographical narrative (section V). Indeed, the memoirs fundamentally narrate a process of *human waste*. Rather than the energetic transformation of the subject and its social reality through the cultural politics of the aesthetic, they narrate a squandering of human potential, the result of institutional policies that, for Vasconcelos's, improperly develop the citizen's capacities, desires and possibilities. Thus, rather than its productive transformation into historical action or aesthetic creation, vital energy was institutionally condemned to be spent sterilely.

Paradoxically, this narrative of waste was both an active element and a harsh critique of Mexican liberalism. For, while it prompted the biggest cultural and pedagogical campaign undertaken (to this day) by the national State, it also fully assumed the more questionable

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to which it belongs (it is even a travelogue, at that, something not enough remarked upon) is decidedly not synonymous with *theory*. Rigor, coherence, systematic construction – these were not their rhetorical strategies. This is not to say, of course, that there is no *theory* or race ideology to be found in *La raza cósmica*, but that it should be looked for in the concrete literary strategies by which such an ideology of race is enacted and distributed.



dimension of liberal popular education –i.e., that artificial and arbitrary hierarchies were to be replaced by a meritocracy. Schools were to be filters (and thus had to be everywhere), the function of which was to distinguish between those meant to think, write and rule, and those meant to work as fragmented tools of the social totality. It is as part of a political project for the creation of a natural aristocracy – an aristocracy of intellect and spirit – that Vasconcelos’s narrative of human waste acquires its pathos.<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, I intend to interpret Vasconcelos’s memoirs in a minor tone. I am not interested in the grand events of Mexican history as narrated by Vasconcelos; I am not interested in the grandiloquent place he assigned himself in the course of such events. What I find revelatory in his memoirs is precisely the opposite: Vasconcelos being bullied by his classmates in a North American school; his intimate encounter with literary works in English; his experience of Mexican classrooms, trying to learn how to write polished Spanish; his despair with the positivistic curricula at the Preparatoria Nacional and with professionalization at the university; his anguish at time wasted writing up legal documents in an office, when it could be spent reading and writing literature or philosophy; the moments of freedom from work and political action he finds in public (mostly American) libraries where he reads philosophy, art, history, theology, everything he can get his hands upon. I am interested in the Vasconcelos that was a punctilious student, an anonymous clerk, a missing husband and a neurotic lover, a wannabe literary classic - not in the gigantic figure he drew of himself and that continues to loom large over the Mexican imaginary.

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<sup>14</sup> One of the most pernicious and still-common consequences of such an ideology of the school is the production and socialization of ‘failure.’ Since it strives to create but the ‘few,’ it must of necessity produce its other, the ‘many,’ those outside of selection. This is a narrative often used to *naturalize* existing social differences, especially as it internalizes ‘failure’ in each subject, makes them intimately feel that they *have* what they *deserve* according to an *objective* measure of value. See Jeff Henderson and Robin Cohen, “On the Reproduction of the Relations of Production,” in *Urban Political Economy and Social Theory: Critical Essays in Urban Studies*, ed. Ray Forrest, Jeff Henderson, and Peter Williams (Aldershot, Hampshire: Gower, 1982).

What this minor-key interpretation of Vasconcelos's memoirs tell us about the relation between literature, education and the production of subjects forms the content of this chapter.

## *II. Las Armas y las Letras: School Vistas*

Like so much in his life, Vasconcelos's school experience was shaped by the childhood time he spent at the US-Mexico border.<sup>15</sup> Born in Oaxaca in 1882, his father's position as a customs officer in the Porfirian bureaucracy defined the nomadic nature of Vasconcelos's family life. Before joining the Preparatoria Nacional in Mexico City, Vasconcelos had lived in Sonora (in Sásabe, a small-town bordering Arizona), El Paso, Piedras Negras (on the Texan border, less than fifty years after the Mexican-American war), Toluca and Campeche (around the time of the Cuban war for independence). If anyone could claim possession of a true *national* consciousness at the turn of the century, it was certainly Vasconcelos. All of his childhood, US imperialism had followed him like a shadow – first at Mexico's northern border, then all the way down south to the Yucatán peninsula. In the latter years of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, Vasconcelos was one of the few intellectuals who could picture – and who had actually experienced - Mexico as a totality. This totality, however, seemed to have in him neither a positive character nor a sense of uniformity. It was a whole that

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<sup>15</sup> In her classic study "First memories, first myths: Vasconcelos's *Ulises Criollo*," Sylvia Molloy explores Vasconcelos's relation to his mother, arguing that "Vasconcelos perceives the mother figure, quite literally, as a textual and ideological matrix [...] Vasconcelos's journey is a representation, literally an acting out, of perpetual separation from and return to the mother in which the textual, the ideological, the physical, and the erotic are inextricably mingled." Anyone who has read *Ulises Criollo* is bound to agree with Molloy that perhaps no Spanish American writer "has devoted more impassioned, and at times more disturbingly intimate pages to the memory of his mother." See Molloy, *At face value*, 199. What I propose here is that such a reading could be complemented by exploring the interplay between the home and the school in *Ulises Criollo*, as well as the role the US-Mexico border played in articulating both spaces. When Molloy discusses Vasconcelos's student days in Eagle Pass, for example, it is implied that these episodes are overdetermined by the mother figure, instead of considering that *both* institutions (and their articulation through the border) are constitutive of Vasconcelos's relation to symbolic capital and pedagogic authority. Also, and without denying an obvious obsession with the mother figure, we should keep in mind that, by the time he wrote his memoirs, Vasconcelos was well-acquainted with psychoanalysis and with all of the European literature and philosophy that was the source of most psychoanalytic ideas. Both Vasconcelos and Freud were, for example, admirers and correspondents of French novelist Romaine Rolland, whose *Jean-Christophe* was influential in their works. In other words, it should not be forgotten that, by 1936, mothers and the "return" to the womb were a literary commonplace.

could only be thought of vis-à-vis an imminent threat, an evanescent consciousness drawn against the dark background of US military expansion.

And yet, Vasconcelos's experience of the border was not one of exclusion as it is understood today. By his own depiction, his childhood days were not "tiempos de espionaje oficial y pasaportes. El tránsito costaba una moneda para la empresa del puente, y los guardas de ambas aduanas se limitaban a revisar los bultos sin inquirir la identidad de los transeúntes." (25) Free circulation, however, did not break down the invisible barriers that separated the two countries; it simply facilitated an experience of the border as something that both unites and differentiates – a distinction that could take place all the more intensely precisely because of freedom of movement. The fact that material constraints were reduced to a minimum meant that cultural tensions could flourish all the more freely.<sup>16</sup>

Growing up in Piedras Negras, Vasconcelos experienced the Texan border as the site of the struggle for cultural prestige. Free circulation made possible for him the acquisition of a first-hand comparative perspective between Mexico and the US, something other Spanish American

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<sup>16</sup> The particular history of the Mexico – US border must here be taken into account. A brief summary may be found in Benjamin H. Johnson's "The Cosmic Race in Texas: Racial Fusion, White Supremacy, and Civil Rights Politics," which traces the influence of Vasconcelos's *cosmic race* on movements for Mexican American civil rights recognition: "Ethnic Mexicans were granted a legal standing as citizens in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and were thus grafted unto the U.S. legal system as white. In the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly in the heavily Mexican-descent enclaves in southern California, northern New Mexico, and south Texas, elite ethnic Mexicans enjoyed legal rights, political power, and social status unreachable for African Americans, U.S. Indian peoples, or Asians in the United States [...] By the 1920s, however, the vast majority of ethnic Mexicans experienced U.S. society as a racially oppressed working class rather than as a distinctive ethnic group. White society denied to all but a very few people of Mexican descent such forms of political expression as office holding, voting, and jury service [...] As the Mexican Revolution prompted hundreds of thousands of Mexicans to flee to the United States, local authorities began to practice a more systematized residential and educational segregation." See *The Journal of American History* 98, no. 2 (September 2011). In the last thirty years, several studies have explored the relation between Vasconcelos's notion of "mestizaje" and Chicano culture. For synthetic overviews on this critical issue, see Genaro Padilla, "Myth and Comparative Cultural Nationalism. The Ideological uses of Aztlán," in *Aztlán. Essays on the Chicano Homeland*, ed. Rudolfo Anaya and Francisco Lomelí (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991); Marilyn Grace Miller, *Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race. The Cult of Mestizaje in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004); and Rafael Pérez-Torres, *Mestizaje. Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

intellectuals like José Enrique Rodó and Alfonso Reyes completely lacked. The common ground for the comparison had nothing to do with economic development. Vasconcelos lived in Piedras Negras at a time in which borders were flourishing commercial centers under the Pax Porfiriana. The common ground for the comparison - the site of contention for cultural prestige - was the institution of the school:

En Piedras Negras prosperaban los negocios. Se construían edificios públicos, se desarrollaba la mecánica en los talleres extranjeros de reparación de locomotoras; abundaban los comercios de lujo, almacenes y joyerías; pero no había una escuela aceptable. Del otro lado, los yanquis no tenían a un caudillo napoleónico ni Leyes de Reforma a lo Juárez; sin embargo, acompañaban su progreso material acelerado, de una esmerada atención a la escuela.<sup>17</sup>

Here, it could be said that Vasconcelos actualizes what Julio Ramos calls “el viaje modernizador:” the journey to Europe or the United States in order to *import* a foreign modernity (technologic, administrative, pedagogic, artistic) into Latin America. But the differences are notable. On the one hand, Vasconcelos does not really *travel* to the United States – he merely walks over from the Mexican border. On the other, the protagonist of this journey is not a politician or an intellectual, but a child.<sup>18</sup> Through this modified literary revival, however, Vasconcelos effects an absolute reversal of the *arielist* cliché of Latin American cultural superiority and the shallow materialism of the US. Here, the contrast is not between a culturally superior but impoverished nation and an economic giant with no interest in culture. Quite the contrary. It is not only that the US indeed gave special attention to the education of its citizens; it is that the subject of a shallow economic development (“comercios de lujo, almacenes, joyerías”) indifferent to culture is actually Mexico.

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<sup>17</sup> José Vasconcelos, *Memorias I* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982), 24.

<sup>18</sup> Ramos reads Domingo Facundo Sarmiento as an index of a generalized praxis amongst Spanish American economic, cultural and political elites: “El intelectual, en Sarmiento, es un viajero que va de lo bajo a lo alto: su autoridad social se legitima en función de la mediación entre la desigualdad. El intelectual viajero traduce la plenitud extranjera con el fin de corregir el mal camino de la tradición propia, esa “descomposición” que distingue su lugar de origen. En ese sentido, el viaje, para Sarmiento es la base misma de la autoridad de su trabajo intelectual.” See “Saber del *otro*: escritura y oralidad en el *Facundo* de D.F. Sarmiento” and “Martí y el viaje a los Estados Unidos” in *Desencuentros*.

Against the reduction of Vasconcelos to a prophet of race, the memoirs' emphasis on the school as the institutional site for the production of culture *difference* and prestige allows him to radically overturn in this passage, if only momentarily, the Latin vs Saxon imaginary.

Vasconcelos did not attend elementary school in Piedras Negras, but in Eagle Pass, across the border. Whereas his family disdainfully referred to their American neighbors as “El Paso del Águila” - never deigning to speak English - that was not reason enough to risk their son's future by sending him to a school on the Mexican side of the border. Going to school in Eagle Pass constituted a crucial experience in Vasconcelos's formation. There, the young man was actually happy: “La escuela me había ido ganando lentamente. Ahora no la hubiera cambiado por la mejor diversión. Ni faltaba nunca a clase.”<sup>19</sup> Significantly, these are the only words of praise for an institution of education written in the memoirs. In stark contrast to the time spent in the classroom of this small American border town, later pedagogical experiences at Mexico's most prestigious centers of education are narrated as a waste of both energy and time. What Vasconcelos crucially learned at Eagle Pass was that the love of knowledge had least to do with disinterested passion – it was intimately related to the production of social and cultural *difference* and the struggle for the recognition of another. In the memoirs, the classroom functions as the site of this drama. Inside it, a modern reformulation of the *las armas y las letras* topic is enacted.

One of *Ulises Criollo*'s first chapters, “El estudio,” narrates the interplay between the sword and the word in the battle for cultural prestige inside the classroom. It would be too easy to explain the battle for cultural prestige as a mere *trans-latio* of external social problems into the classroom, as if children carried international politics in their lunchboxes. A more interesting

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<sup>19</sup> José Vasconcelos, *Memorias I*, 31.

approach would consider this battle as the result of the school's *own mechanisms*, derived from its concrete social function at a particular time. Vasconcelos's narration certainly points towards such a reading: "Uno de los maestros nos puso expeditos en sumas, restas, multiplicaciones, consumadas en grupo en voz alta, gritando el resultado el primero que lo obtenía. En la misma forma nos ejercitaba en el deletreo o *spelling*, que constituye disciplina aparte en la lengua inglesa. Periódicamente se celebraban concursos."<sup>20</sup> As can be seen, *competition* is the internal dynamic of the school in Vasconcelos's narration, the paradigmatic form of the play of culture inside the classroom. Thus, before considering the battle for cultural prestige in its nationalistic dimension, we should not forget the kind of individual prestige distributed inside the classroom. The school indeed produces a specific hegemony, and yet this hegemony does not only deal with the production and distribution of particular *cultural identities* but also with the distinction between citizens according to *qualifications*. The qualifications refer to a set of knowledges as well as to a particular form of speaking and writing them, 'school language.' Both grant access to social privilege (mainly related to the distribution of manual and intellectual labor) and, in the liberal imagination, to the possibility of accessing governance. This line of consideration will be further explored in discussing Vasconcelos's description of Mexican classrooms.

In turn, it is one of the school's own instruments which detonates the cultural wars inside the classroom. A passage is worth quoting at length:

Y peor me irritaba si al hablar de las costumbres de los mexicanos junto con las de los esquimales, algún alumno decía:

*-Mexicans are a semi-civilized people.*

En mi hogar se afirmaba, al contrario, que los yanquis eran recién venidos a la cultura. Me levantaba, pues, a repetir:

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<sup>20</sup> Vasconcelos, 31.

-Tuvimos imprenta antes que vosotros.

Intervenía la maestra aplacándonos y diciendo:

*-But look at Joe, he is a Mexican, isn't he civilized?, isn't he a gentleman?*<sup>21</sup>

This is a brief but remarkable scene. Let's zoom in the most obvious, thus quasi-invisible, element in the micro-narrative: the comparison between Mexicans and Eskimos that ignites Vasconcelos's anger. The classroom (and its pedagogical instruments, such as the textbook and the syllabus: "...la próxima lección en que volviéramos a leer en el propio texto frases y juicios que me hacían pedir la palabra para rebatir"<sup>22</sup>) is the place that makes such comparisons possible. Inside the classroom, the whole of history can be compressed into an instant, the farthest reaches of geography collapsed. It is this *existing-next-to* in space and time ("las costumbres de los mexicanos *junto con* las de los esquimales") which makes of the classroom such a crucial locus in the construction of cultural difference and the struggle for prestige. This reorganization of space and time inside the classroom gives way to the assertion of Vasconcelos's classmate: "*Mexicans are a semi-civilized people.*"

Against the accusation of barbarism, the young Vasconcelos strikes back with an affirmation of cultural precedence in history: we had the printing press before you did. Compared with that, Americans were but "newcomers" to culture. But what precisely does Vasconcelos mean by the "we" in this passage? Certainly, Mexico and Mexicans, but there is more depth to the first-person plural. As Arcadio Díaz Quiñones has argued, the identification between culture and print by late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Spanish speaking intellectuals was the ground on which the notion of 'Hispanidad' was founded.<sup>23</sup> Reading, writing and the book format created a

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<sup>21</sup> Vasconcelos, 34.

<sup>22</sup> Vasconcelos, 32.

<sup>23</sup> See *Sobre los principios: los intelectuales caribeños y la tradición* (Bernal, Argentina: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes Editorial, 2006). Here, Díaz Quiñones subjects the idea of Hispanic cultural unity through writing (a commonplace essential for certain formulations of *Hispanidad*, such as Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo's and Americo Castro's) to a rigorous cultural critique. This revision, however, is hindered by the fact that it works with notions of "orality" and "writing" that are completely exclusive and antithetical. That is, it fails to account for the interest in

wide circuit of administrative and cultural connections between the peninsular and the trans-Atlantic possessions of the Spanish Empire. Once the Empire collapsed, these connections were exploited by intellectuals in order to create a new kind of imperial structure – not administrative but ideal, made of common feelings, ideas, histories. An Empire of Spirit. This project was in nature strategic. For the imperial dimension of ‘Hispanidad’ was intricately linked to the consolidation of cultural elites in Spanish American countries at the end of the nineteenth century. It allowed the literate minorities of each country to break the isolation of newly formed national identities and thus be part of international circles of cultural exchange; it allowed emerging national traditions to have a (unequal) share in the cultural capital of nine centuries of written culture. ‘Hispanidad’ was indeed an imperial project, one that was the result of a negotiation between the cultural prestige of the old world and the claim to the future of the new. The negotiation made sense against that *other* Empire rising in the North – one that supposedly had no past and that claimed the future as its rightful bounty. This is indeed the case in Vasconcelos’s narration, where the printing press works as an index of the cultural strategy known as ‘Hispanidad.’

Language plays also a crucial role in Vasconcelos’s fashioning of himself in the scene. Of course, that his younger self speaks in very *castizo* Spanish is meant to delineate and guard his authentic national being. This is in accord with the natural bond established between *language* and *self* by writing memoirs, in Spanish or in any given language. But the reader also perceives the unlikeliness of such a dialogue, given that classes surely took place in English inside the Eagle Pass classroom. Less than a successful performance of a national self through language, the child’s

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“orality” and “native” languages that, as far as Bernardino de Sahagún and the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, characterized Spanish imperial expansion in its many phases.



answer (written by the old man) underlines the mere literariness of the maneuver. There is another moment later on in the memoirs which echoes this feeling. While doing a year of high school at the Instituto Científico y Literario de Toluca, the young man uses his time to

afirmarse en el castellano escrito. Tanto ejercicio en un idioma extranjero me causaba entorpecimientos en el propio. Me complacía meterme en México, y sentir cómo caía la cascarilla de barniz extranjero. Otras materias: geografía, historia, religión, creía yo saberlas mejor que el maestrillo mechudo; lo acataba en lengua nacional y lo respetaba por temor de que me declarase suspenso.<sup>24</sup>

Both of these classroom scenes produce a moment of what Russian formalists termed *ostranenie*, a defamiliarization related, in this case, to the identity between language and self; an identity that the memoirs have as one of their implicit presuppositions. They open up, as it were, a brief window to glimpse a multilingual plot, a self for whom translation is the essential cultural task. In the first scene, the use of Spanish to fashion young Vasconcelos highlights his place *between* languages; in the last, national language is actually identified with school language: “meterme en México, y sentir cómo caía la cascarilla de barniz extranjero” is the same thing as learning how to write Spanish with a “maestrillo mechudo.” The scene partakes of the mundane and the sublime - *lengua nacional* as an expression of being but mainly as a high-school course of study.

Ultimately, in the Eagle Pass classroom, it is young Vasconcelos who stands as embodiment of cultural prestige: “But look at Joe, he is a Mexican, isn’t he civilized?, isn’t he a gentleman?” Like a Goddess restoring balance and drawing the comedy to a close, the teacher’s intervention is meaningful less in relation to Vasconcelos’s vanity and more as it exposes a particular way of enacting cultural prestige in and through the school: the “civilized” body of the educated subject. Again, the distinction between the “civilized” and the “barbaric” is only partially related to cultural nationalisms, for the production of such a distinction is in fact the task of the

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<sup>24</sup> Vasconcelos, 77.

school. We are all here civilized because we are all in the school, would be another way of phrasing the teacher's healing intervention.

But it is a false *deus ex machina*; civilization is the other face of barbarism, as Walter Benjamin wrote. Nationalist passion exceeds the classroom's rhetoric and seeks release in the mythical afterworld of the school: *la salida*. The dichotomy between *las armas y las letras* is reinstated to its literal dimension, in which a word is a word and a fist a fist:

Al principio me bastaba con estar atento en clase para la defensa verbal. Los otros mexicanos me estimulaban, me apoyaban; durante el asueto se enfrentaban a mis contradictores, se cambiaban puñetazos. Pero la pugna fue creciendo y llegó a personalizarse. Un rubio sanguíneo, agresivo, gringo acabado, la tomó directamente conmigo. La consabida discusión sobre el valor de los mexicanos concluyó con un:

-Eso lo veremos a la salida.<sup>25</sup>

If prestige is enacted in the educated person's body, the humiliation of the body brings about the destruction of the prestige. After class, the young Vasconcelos is badly beaten up by his hot-blooded opponent. He refuses to surrender, however; a teacher breaks up the fight and the resolution is postponed to the next afternoon. During lunch on the next day, a Mexican pupil approaches a depressed Vasconcelos and offers him a way out of his problem: "– Toma – me dijo, enseñándome una navaja – te la presto. Estos gringos le tienen miedo al <<fierro>>. Guárdala para la tarde."<sup>26</sup> The pupil is (unsurprisingly) right: Vasconcelos's opponent refuses to face him with a knife; Mexican national dignity, embodied in young Vasconcelos, is restored. Later on in his life Vasconcelos was known to carry a gun at all times (Antonieta Rivas Mercado, his lover, shot herself in Paris' Notre Dame with Vasconcelos's gun). In his youth, he went to school carrying a

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<sup>25</sup> Vasconcelos, 32.

<sup>26</sup> Vasconcelos, 33.

knife in order to uphold national dignity but, above of all, to enjoy his studies: “Fue una fortuna que así lograra hacerme respetar, porque las clases me fascinaban.”<sup>27</sup>

I find revealing the parallel between Vasconcelos’s school years in Eagle Pass – years of struggle, both cultural and physical, yet fruitful and even happy – and his years of high school spent near Mexico’s southern border, in Campeche. Before leaving Eagle Pass for Campeche, Vasconcelos was offered a scholarship to continue his studies at Austin. His family declined. For the rest of his life, the allure of having become a Yankee philosopher haunted Vasconcelos; perhaps he could have been, he wondered, the Mexican Santayana? Be that as it may, Eagle Pass remained the standard with which he measured his following experiences at school, first in Toluca, then in Campeche, and finally in Mexico City.

As I have said, Vasconcelos “shed” his foreign crust at Toluca by learning to command written Spanish. Whereas in Toluca the study of the *lengua nacional* was closely linked with the school’s Jacobin, revolutionary nationalism, in Campeche Vasconcelos found in ‘school language’ the primary element in the academy’s social function:

Los de Campeche, fáciles de trato, <<campechanos>>, no eran para estarse cultivando rencores ni de religión ni de política. Inclínados a la buena vida, despreocupados, bromistas, poetas más bien que teorizantes, ponían más orgullo en un buen decir que en el dogma creyente o laicista. Por ejemplo: nuestro profesor de Gramática, apellidado Aznar, abogado, poeta y lechuguino, redactaba con énfasis largos párrafos del texto de otro Aznar yucateco, pariente suyo: <<No acierto a comprender>>, etc., etc. El <<no acierto>> me dejaba impresión de elegancia retórica.<sup>28</sup>

Irreducible to either Liberal Jacobinism or Catholicism – the two fundamental political identities of the second half of the nineteenth century – the school’s peculiar sociability is here fully at work. There is, of course, nothing frivolous about *un buen decir* – the border between “civilization” and

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<sup>27</sup> Vasconcelos, 34.

<sup>28</sup> Vasconcelos, 94.

“barbarism” is made of such bookish and worn-out phrases. In turn, training in formal Spanish was complemented with the study of the language that fully embodied cultural prestige, French. A peculiar kind of French, that is:

A pesar, pues, de mi mala memoria y de mi resistencia, logré grabarme en la mente ciertos conocimientos útiles como las conjugaciones francesas, *J'ai, tu as, il a*, y la sintaxis de la *y* [sic], con párrafos del Telémaco [sic]: *Calipso ne pouvait se consoler du départ d'Ulysse*, etc., etc. No éramos capaces de dialogar un minuto en francés, pero repetíamos versos y tiradas de prosa pronunciando a la manera de *Carcassone, où toutes les lettres sonnent*, y, peor aún, conforme a nuestra nativa prosodia castellana, modificada apenas con una que otra regla no muy fija como la de que *ai* suena *e* y por lo mismo se dice *pen* para decir *pan*, aunque luego resulta que en París pronuncian *pan*.<sup>29</sup>

Both forms of writing (the French one disregarding orality completely) represented the cultural capital distributed by the school. They constituted the linguistic performance of cultural prestige, precise marks that organize social relations through language. What was learned was not precisely Spanish or French, but a way of writing both languages that granted access to the public sphere as the social group of the ‘cultured.’ In the well-known tale, a man discovers he can get inside a cave full of riches by pronouncing the magic words “open sesame;” in Mexico, at the turn of the century, it was writing such phrases as “no acierto a comprender” that did the trick.

Inside the classroom in Campeche, the distribution of cultural capital is described by Vasconcelos as part of a specific political project: the substitution of the landowning and military aristocracies in power for a civil government of the educated. This was indeed one of the main political preoccupations of the *arielista* project. For Vasconcelos, the game of culture involved these high stakes and the playfield was drawn according to social class:

Relata un alumno acomodado los ocios de la vacación en su hacienda de las cercanías [...]  
Protestando con violencia, los desheredados gritábamos:

-Son los propietarios los que debían ir a los cepos.

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<sup>29</sup> Vasconcelos, 95. The reference is to Francois Fénelon’s *Les aventures de Télémac, fils d’Ulysse* (1699).

Sin tomarnos en cuenta respondían los ricos:

-Es que ustedes no tienen fincas.

Nos desquitábamos de ellos en clase, ganándoles primeros lugares. Un Lino Gómez, de humilde familia tabasqueña, era mi rival para el primer puesto; todas las primeras filas eran de la clase media, como que a los ricos ¿qué les importaba el saber? ¡Tenían las tierras, las indias jóvenes, los esclavos viejos!<sup>30</sup>

Here, Vasconcelos articulates a complex social schema: with one narrative gesture, he claims the identity of his social status – the middle-class son of a government official – with that of a poor (“humilde”) student from Tabasco, *and* pits both together against the private landowners, the *latifundistas*. The scene embodies a complex fantasy in which *los humildes* are not simply absorbed into the middle classes: a third social category emerges from this contact, the educated. It is still possible, thus, to despise the middle-classes for their frivolity and the popular classes for their lack of culture. The result of this utopia is not a classless society, but one in which the educated class is the legitimate repository of the nation’s authority. From the artificial hierarchies of the past to the *natural* hierarchies of human talent, as Prospero preached in *Ariel*. In Vasconcelos’s narration, the function of the school is to articulate the alliance of the *best* against the capricious tyrannies of the past, such as massive land owning. The scene just discussed is quite literally the *mis-en-scène* of a class-alliance.

And yet, Campeche’s classrooms were not up to Vasconcelos’s high expectations; they revealed to him a bookish culture transmitted through the exercise of memory, which was far from any action driven notion of education. The failure of such a bookish culture was evinced in the lack of great individuals who could embody cultural prestige in the way he did at Eagle Pass. This anxiety about human waste is narrated in the chapter entitled “El grande hombre.” In it, Vasconcelos ruminates on the figure of a “great man” - Joaquín Baranda, former governor of

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<sup>30</sup> Vasconcelos, 115-116.

Campeche, notable pedagogue and author of a celebrated *Discurso sobre la poesía mexicana*.<sup>31</sup>

The event narrated by Vasconcelos likely occurred around 1895, when Baranda was Minister of Justice and Public Instruction in the Díaz regime:

Desembarcó una mañana en nuestro muelle. Lo anunciaron escasos cohetes y lo seguía una comisión de funcionarios. Por debajo de nuestros balcones marchó indiferente, quizás afable. Vestía con elegancia, avanzaba con soltura, aunque tenía ya el pelo entrecano. Los provincianos sin duda lo envidiaban al verlo pasar. Los estudiantes del Instituto, que por cierto no fuimos convocados para aclamarle, conocíamos su fama de buen orador y aficionado a las aventuras galantes. Se alababan sus discursos escritos en buen estilo y sus ocurrencias escépticas. Se llamaba don Joaquín Baranda. En otro ambiente hubiera hecho un gran papel; metido en una administración de fuerza bruta y papeleo hipócrita, su esfuerzo abortaba. Él lo sabía y se consolaba gozando las oportunidades del buen vivir (112)

Contrary to what the title of the episode might suggest, the arrival of the great man is an underwhelming event, with few fireworks and only a group of official functionaries to welcome him. But I find the last lines to be very revealing: “En otro ambiente hubiera hecho un gran papel; metido en una administración de fuerza bruta y papeleo hipócrita, su esfuerzo abortaba.” What Vasconcelos describes here is not really the arrival of a great man, but the arrival of a *would have been* great man – a wasted bullet. Vasconcelos, the student who will someday be Minister of Education, sees as in an inverted mirror the figure of Baranda buried under bureaucratic paperwork; school language, once it has provided access to the public sphere, turns into the dead letter of official rhetoric. Paperwork is “hypocritical” because it conceals the nature of the regime as “brute force.” Contrary to the dream of a new, educated aristocracy legitimately taking hold of the nation’s destiny, *bon vivant* Baranda is the result of a kind of blockade, an occlusion in the

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<sup>31</sup> For an account of Baranda’s tenure as Minister of Education, and the role he played in the revival of positivistic education in the 1890s, see Charles A. Hale, “The Great Textbook Controversy” and “Positivism, Liberalism, Society” in *The Transformation of Liberalism in Late Nineteenth-Century Mexico* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

social circuit that should bring together talent and power. The conclusion of this narrative of wasted talent is both hedonism and a provincial sort of celebrity.

At Eagle Pass, Vasconcelos learned the high stakes in the game of culture: the production of prestige and the struggle against *difference* imposed by a foreign gaze. In Mexico, he found out that the national team had no players. What José Enrique Rodó called the ‘capital’ of youth was spent sterilely and thoughtlessly. A few years after his season at Campeche, back in Piedras Negras for his mother’s funeral, Vasconcelos again compares his childhood town with its American neighbor:

Era doloroso lo que hacían con mi ciudad aquellas autoridades cretinas. En cambio, el otro lado, dentro de su estilo moderno, mejoraba notoriamente, no solo en cantidad, también en gusto. El contraste me humillaba. De un lado la fuerza, el acierto, la libertad. Del lado nuestro la ruindad, la envidia, el despotismo. Los de Eagle Pass no habrían vacilado en abrir un concurso entre los escolares, en busca de alguna idea aprovechable. Sólo entre nosotros la suficiencia torpe se aliaba al autoritarismo sombrío.<sup>32</sup>

In this vision of Eagle Pass, the utopian, idealizing element can be characterized as a free-flowing circuit from the school to the management of regional or national power. The school, and the society built around it, are an efficient process of production that incorporates the raw product of youth, develops its potential and invests it in the efficient management of society. No excess, no waste: pedagogical hygiene. On the other hand, in Mexico “inept self-importance” and “gloomy authoritarianism” are obstacles that waste the energies of educated youth by not exploiting their potential. In turn, cultural figures such as Baranda are characterized as the wasteful result of the cultural politics of the Porfirian regime: “Sorprende que los hombres mejor dotados de aquella época no dejasen obra social ni obra escrita. Sin duda los agobiaba el medio. El himno diario de toda la prensa, de casi toda la intelectualidad, en alabanza de la medianía homicida encaramada en

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<sup>32</sup> Vasconcelos, *Memorias I*, 143.

la presidencia desde los días de Bustamante y con diversos nombres, va deformando el criterio y lo lleva a perder la noción y el amor del héroe.”<sup>33</sup> It is a grey picture Vasconcelos paints: a Mexican wasteland inhabited by the ghosts of possibility, each barren body the reminder of a missed opportunity.

Vasconcelos’s view of the Mexican classroom is thus constituted by the void between the school’s imagined social function (producing an educated elite) and its actual relation to the power of the military and landowning elites. Cut off in this manner from public life, or absorbed into its “hypocrite paperwork” and “brute force,” the dream of a spiritual aristocracy turned into the nightmare of wasted cultural capital. Eagle Pass worked in Vasconcelos’s imagination as an utopian horizon in which human talent, distinguished and developed at the school, was successfully introduced into efficient administration; in the case of Mexico, however, “el funcionarismo porfirista, aparte de burocracia, había llegado a constituir una especie de nobleza, codiciada aun por los capitalistas.”<sup>34</sup> As we shall see, it was against such an institutional background that Vasconcelos advanced his aesthetic notion of literature and the arts.

### *III. Stream of Clarity: Professionalization, Desire, and the Aesthetic Reversal*

In *Ariel*, Prospero warned his pupils about the dangers of despair and waste. Youth was a blessed force, yet it was not “exenta de malograrse y desvanecerse, como un impulso sin objeto, en la realidad.”<sup>35</sup> First amongst these dangers were the demands of professional life. For Prospero, professionalization at the university was akin to a process of mutilation of every individual’s spirit. It demanded investment only in one aspect of life, eroding the social bonds that could only be

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<sup>33</sup> Vasconcelos, 221.

<sup>34</sup> Vasconcelos, 227.

<sup>35</sup> José Enrique Rodó, *Ariel*, ed. Pablo Rocca (Sevilla: Editorial Renacimiento, 2019), 69.



sustained by shared ‘universal’ interest – the *res publica* was what lay beyond professional specialization. The same year Rodó published his essay, José Vasconcelos began his professional studies at the Escuela Nacional de Jurisprudencia in Mexico City. The Uruguayan’s words might have been directed straight at the young Mexican student. Indeed, Vasconcelos’s first year of college after having completed the Preparatoria Nacional is narrated as a crucial moment in his formation: disenchanted with his studies, involved in a tortuous love affair, morally lost to the city’s bohemia, the young student not only felt the danger of “malograrse” but its sly pleasures. This was a year in which Vasconcelos gazed deep into the abyss and the abyss gazed back: “¿Para qué el estudio y para qué la acción, si la bella vida podría ser gustada a sorbos, palpada en el cristal del ambiente?”<sup>36</sup> And yet, he was “saved” from the temptation of inaction and waste, by a chance encounter with Dante, of all poets, in the streets of Mexico City.

In *Ulises Criollo*, the maiming of the spirit that occurs in professional schools is represented as the misdirection of the students’ *desire*. This misdirection, and its overcoming through aesthetic experience, are narrated in a series of four chapters: “En Jurisprudencia,” “La pendiente,” “Conatos de pasión,” and “Chorro de claridad.” These lively pages, some of the best in the memoirs, draw a picture of student culture at the turn of the century in decadent fashion: wine, poetry, sex, Baudelaire, Dostoevsky, death, cards, music, hunger and all the rest. The four chapters narrate the student’s descent into an abyss of sterility, starting from a lack of interest in his law studies and evolving into a frustrated love affair with a young waitress. The “capital” of youth, which Prospero had advised to invest wisely, was trapped in a closed circuit of frustrated intellectual and sexual desires. Vasconcelos found the way out of this circuit by reading Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Indeed, this was the function he assigned to literature and the arts: to transform

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<sup>36</sup> Vasconcelos, *Memorias I*, 154.

or re-direct wasted individual desire into historical action or cultural production. An analysis of this sequence, with its *climax* in the reading scene, allows us to draw with finer detail this dynamic.

Vasconcelos chose to become a lawyer by elimination: he had no talent for math and thus for engineering, and the study of medicine involved “aprender de memoria todos los nombres de los huesos con sus facetas y articulaciones,” something that did not stir his enthusiasm.<sup>37</sup> Although he was not particularly interested in law either, being a lawyer could give him earthly means without taking up *all* of his time, and he could continue to indulge in his metaphysical phantasies. Of course, Vasconcelos would have liked to become a professional philosopher (although he avoids the use of the adjective, rather using “official” or “formal” philosopher), but the Positivistic curriculum made that impossible: “...dentro del nuevo régimen comtiano la filosofía estaba excluida: en su lugar figuraba, en el *curriculum*, la sociología. Ni siquiera una cátedra de Historia de la Filosofía se había querido conservar.”<sup>38</sup> Even if the possibility had existed, I find it doubtful Vasconcelos would have chosen to major in Philosophy rather than Law. As we shall see, he took particular pride in his private success as a lawyer: being economically independent from the government was, for him, proof of his philosophical and political earnestness.

Beyond their practical advantages, Vasconcelos considered the liberal professions as second-class forms of knowledge. In this case, the recourse to social class is quite literal, since Vasconcelos’s imagination of knowledge’s hierarchy was class based. When confronted at the Preparatoria Nacional with the possibility of a career in the natural sciences, he dismisses it on the grounds that “el laboratorio era el taller del obrero científico. Las leyes allí descubiertas interesaban al filósofo solo por su relación con el concepto del universo que a él corresponde

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<sup>37</sup> Vasconcelos, 170.

<sup>38</sup> The Escuela Nacional de Altos Estudios was not created until 1909, through the work of Justo Sierra. The Facultad de Filosofía y Letras was inaugurated in 1924, shortly after Vasconcelos resigned as Minister of Education.

formular. Tal iba a ser mi papel; acumular las conclusiones parciales de todas las ciencias a efectos de construir con ellas una visión coherente del Cosmos.”<sup>39</sup> Later on, when looking for a suitable topic for a Law thesis, he imagines science as a residential building and political economy as its pantry: “Pero aquella [sic] era la despensa del edificio científico, tema para las amas de llaves de la inteligencia.”<sup>40</sup> And still later on, writing on Schopenhauer, he takes a dig at professional philosophy itself: “Déjale al flamante profesor el aplauso entero de sus iguales. Tú no eres ídolo de escuela ni te entalla la librea del académico. También hay la clase media filosófica; déjala *hegelianizar*...”<sup>41</sup> These were second-class forms of knowledge precisely on the account of their professional status, which implied their intimate relation to the market and the world of work. Furthermore, these second-class forms of knowledge implied gathering or accumulating raw material, which was then turned into a *significant synthesis* (Vasconcelos’s “Cosmos”) by the aristocratic thinker. What Vasconcelos’s social hierarchy of knowledge thus implies is a chain of production in which the professional disciplines occupy the position of mere laborers, in terms of both activity and prestige.

Naturally, the young man soon lost interest in his legal studies: “Al entrar a las cátedras de Jurisprudencia advertí como un descenso en la categoría de la enseñanza. No era aquello ciencia, sino a lo sumo lógica aplicada y casuística.”<sup>42</sup> Like in Toluca and Campeche, Vasconcelos found in the Escuela Nacional de Jurisprudencia a bookish culture focused on the exercise of memory through writing. He was a young vitalist who expected all education to be interested in Life: “...faltábale un genio filosófico que incorporara el fenómeno jurídico al complejo de los

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<sup>39</sup> Vasconcelos, *Memorias I*, 152.

<sup>40</sup> Vasconcelos, 234.

<sup>41</sup> Vasconcelos, 272.

<sup>42</sup> Vasconcelos, 171.

fenómenos naturales.”<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, his image of the Porfirian regime as a wasteland of individual talent continued to be cemented at the Escuela Nacional de Jurisprudencia. There he met Jacinto Pallares, professor of Civil and Commercial Law. At the turn of the century, Pallares was a notable private lawyer who was constantly excluded of official matters due to his criticisms of the Díaz regime. He had also polemized against Justo Sierra on account of the teaching of Latin in secondary schools, which Pallares defended as the staunch Catholic that he was.<sup>44</sup> On this last account, Vasconcelos recounts how Pallares had been publicly ridiculed in Congress by Francisco Bulnes, who addressed him as “señor Pajares.” Pallares’ talent was made unnecessary by the nature of the regime: “Por experiencia sabia que sus mejores alegatos podía echarlos por tierra una sugestión, una consigna del Caudillo.”<sup>45</sup> Insulted and ignored, he could not find comfort in Baranda’s skeptic hedonism. In Vasconcelos’s account, Pallares is a distant and sarcastic professor who constantly reminds his students that Mexico is a country of “catorce millones de imbéciles.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, he is another figure in *Ulises Criollo’s* constellation of wasted souls - sharp, embittered and brilliant.

Bored by translating and commenting legal texts, Vasconcelos stopped attending classes. Instead, he set out to explore the School of Medicine with two of his roommates, medical students both of them. Their wanderings around the Hospital Juárez and Mexico City’s asylums are narrated in “La pendiente,” a wonderful piece of decadentism. The title of this chapter, “The slope,” refers to the second moment in Vasconcelos’s descent into the abyss of wasted desire, characterized by a movement from the *dead letter* of the Law to the *dead bodies* of Science. The hospital is

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<sup>43</sup> Vasconcelos, 171.

<sup>44</sup> Again, see Hale, “The Great Textbook Controversy.”

<sup>45</sup> Vasconcelos, *Memorias I*, 172.

<sup>46</sup> Vasconcelos, 171.

described as an evil procession of sick people, criminals, alcoholics, prostitutes and lepers. For Vasconcelos, the sights and smells of death were chastening:

después de contemplar los tumores y las llagas, casi no impresionaba el anfiteatro, con su media docena de cadáveres despedazados sobre planchas impregnadas de la pestilencia inconfundible: la cadaverina...bastaría recordarla para quitarnos toda posibilidad de sensación voluptuosa fundada en la atracción de la carne.<sup>47</sup>

The images of bodily decay function as an erotic experience. “The slope” enacts, as it were, a romantic contrast between death and lust with the School of Medicine as background.

Death and suffering correct unruly desire – the sick body echoes the body of the lover and reveals its true nature. But (following the romantic topic) this intimate relation between death and the body is actually what propels Vasconcelos’s lust throughout the memoirs. Even in the hospital scene, he cannot help but envision a future lover: “Con todo, años después, en la voluptuosidad de un amor que declinaba, sentí de pronto algo como el tufo de la cadaverina.”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Vasconcelos’s most intense love affairs are at some level characterized by a kind of death-impulse: if libido is the manifestation of two fundamental drives, as Freud argued, then Vasconcelos’s sexual desire was emphatically linked to *Thanatos*, not *Eros*. He was also prey to an orientalist fancy of ending human suffering by putting an end to biological reproduction. Sexual passion, the whole of erotic life, was thus negatively defined as the *non-productive*. That is, it could only be suffered and enjoyed as a gesture *against* biological reproduction and its fundamental social institution, the family. Sex was the most dangerous form of waste because it represented a kind of *positive* infertility: it gave release to desire without (biologically) producing anything, it was *nothing but* relief. In the end, it took more than hospital life and philosophical reflection to subdue the sexual desires of young students: “La cadaverina: Pero ¿de qué sirven las profundas lecciones

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<sup>47</sup> Vasconcelos, 175.

<sup>48</sup> Vasconcelos, 175.

a una juventud en frenesí, sedienta de goce? Con todo y la dosis matinal de cadaverina, por las noches corríamos tras de las más humildes faldas.”<sup>49</sup>

The backdrop to Vasconcelos’s incursions into Mexico City’s night life was not only his lack of interest in the study of Law. Crucially, these excursions also resulted from his writing frustrations: “Alarmado, pues, del tiempo que corría inútil como si una vena de la propia sangre corriese perdiéndose, arrastrándonos al vacío del no ser, me angustiaba de las horas sin empleo valioso. Ensayaba escribir; pero apenas traducía mi pensamiento en signos, las ideas perdían toda su profundidad; lo escrito me desencantaba, me irritaba como una traición a mi esencia singularmente valiosa.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, frustrated literary impulses sought satisfaction in sexual pleasure. Literary frustration is analogous to sexual frustration: an obstruction, the impediment of release. To release one would be to magically release the other. And yet, for a kind of desire that delights in unproductiveness, sexual release would mean a finale rather than a fulfilment. Thus, this pleasure cannot find satisfaction in the moment of release, but rather in its continued postponement, which is the continuous enjoyment of that which has no goal other than itself. Vasconcelos’s adventures in the world of sex constantly resulted in such devouring passions, in which desire *desires itself* in the figure of another body. In the final section of this chapter, the analogy between autobiographical writing (as expression of a singular essence) and desire that indefinitely postpones its own end will be further explored.

In one of their nightly excursions, Vasconcelos met María Sarabia, a young waitress with whom he began a tortuous relationship made of sexual frustration and redemptive fantasies. María was “una morena esbelta de cara oval, ojazos y trenzas negros [sic]”; Vasconcelos was seized by

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<sup>49</sup> Vasconcelos, 175-176.

<sup>50</sup> Vasconcelos, 179.

a violent passion the moment he saw her: “Deslumbrado, la contemplé a la vez que un deseo violento, pasión en *coup de foudre*, me levantó del asiento... Por entre las sillas logré alcanzarla y le planté un beso tronado en la mejilla.”<sup>51</sup> In a lower-class, dark-skinned beautiful woman from Mexico City’s nightlife, he found the perfect figure for his devouring desire. María represented for the young student a city made of decadent pleasures and sensuous waste: “Organizábamos entonces el cuarteto con uno de los colegas, y nos marchábamos de paseo, rematando siempre en alguno de los bares estudiantiles. Su oficio de camarera la había hecho bebedora. Los estudiantes bebíamos por presumir de calaveras y de románticos.”<sup>52</sup> This experience at once aroused Vasconcelos’s desire and created in him a need to redeem the object of this desire. This was exacerbated due to María’s refusal to sleep with him: “‘Sé bueno – insistía -, quíereme bien...’ Con decirlo, quedaba domeñada la urgencia y una ternura honda enlazaba las manos, súbitamente tranquilizadas.”<sup>53</sup> Poor and pure, belonging ambiguously to the city’s nightlife, representing at once temptation and salvation, decadent sex and grace, María is a modernist’s quintessential sexual fantasy. In the fantasy, the postponement of sexual gratification becomes the passion itself by preserving the independence between the lustful and the saintly aspects of the body of desire. Sexual gratification would mean the end of the dialectical tension between the two elements, and thus of desire itself. Only infinite postponement can allow such a passion to reproduce itself. At the same time, lack of possession of the desired body was the cause of painful jealousy; but even then, the possibility that María might be leading a life of unruly pleasure behind his back only fueled his desire even more. The only way out of this convoluted figure of passion was through marital redemption: “Revestía de abnegación y piedad mi deseo voluptuoso y me convencía de

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<sup>51</sup> Vasconcelos, 180.

<sup>52</sup> Vasconcelos, 181.

<sup>53</sup> Vasconcelos, 182.

que era mi deber ligar su destino al mío <<tendiéndole la mano>>.”<sup>54</sup> Vasconcelos did propose to María, although she took it for a joke; nonetheless, he wrote to his father informing him of his decision to leave the Escuela Nacional de Jurisprudencia and began searching for a job as a minor clerk in official administration.

Through María’s figure, Vasconcelos fantasized about an existence devoted to bodily pleasure, the sterile reverse of a productive life of action: “La linda perdida de largos cabellos oscuros, labios enloquecedores, talle flexible y largas ancas envueltas en falda roja, era la imagen viva de la angustia que puede tornarse en goce. Bien se podía prescindir de todas las promesas de una existencia heroica, vencedora, con tal de pasar un año o unas semanas enredado en su carne, pendiente de sus labios.”<sup>55</sup> To lose himself to passion was to abandon the sphere of action: desire is total and nothing else can be pursued. Here lies the *crux* of the fantasy, in its totalizing demand that everything else be forsaken for it. It is a monastic fantasy of abandoning *the world* – law, family expectations, a professional career, official positions, writing books – for a life of devotion: in this case devotion to sexual desire. The contemplation of María’s beauty was above all an unproductive activity: “¡Era tan bello estar todo el día y también de noche embebido en su hermosura!”<sup>56</sup> It was not, however, a cheap one: going from bar to bar took its toll on Vasconcelos’s personal economy, and he soon began to borrow money from friends. He had stopped attending class, was the subject of an obsessive passion, could not write, drank more than ever and had fallen into debt. He was in despair, yet conscious of it and even sneering at it, enjoying the feeling of wasting away.

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<sup>54</sup> Vasconcelos, 182.

<sup>55</sup> Vasconcelos, 181.

<sup>56</sup> Vasconcelos, 183.



It was then that Vasconcelos found and read Dante's *Divine Comedy*. One morning, strolling through a park east of the Cathedral, he found a prose translation in a street bookshop. With his last peso, he took the book home and began to read. It was a most fortunate investment. I will quote at some length Vasconcelos's description of the experience:

Exaltado, interrumpía la lectura, poseído de un delirio ideológico. Con desdén apartaba la jerga filosófica de los contemporáneos, petulante y mezquina, incapaz de engendrar una concepción decorosa del mundo. ¡De suerte que aquél era el medievo desdeñado por los positivistas!

El mensaje dantesco no es tesis que se discute y se prueba ni es resumen de hechos concordados que sirven para formular una ley... La doctrina dantista es una música que penetra y fortalece, dejándonos ricos para siempre. Nunca me abandonarían aquellos consejos del Canto Vigésimo Cuarto:

*Ahora es preciso que sacudas tu pereza; que no se alcanza la fama reclinado en blanda pluma..., y el que sin gloria consume su vida deja en pos de sí la misma huella que el humo en el aire o la espuma en el agua... Ea, pues, levántate... domina la fatiga con el alma que vence todos los obstáculos, mientras no se envilece... Tenemos que subir una escala todavía más larga...*

<<No basta – añadía yo por mi cuenta – estar atravesando por entre los espíritus infernales...>> <<Ea, levántate>>, y del suelo me levantaba un batir de alas. Y como enfrentándome a la oscuridad de mi destino, mentalmente le decía: <<Seas como fueres, vamos, que me siento fuerte y atrevido.>> Y por muchos días cesó el quebranto de mis dudas y también la sed de los apetitos insatisfechos.

Jirones, torbellinos de pensamientos, descendían, estremecían las fibras de mi conciencia, le restituían sus poderes nativos. Y con sarcasmo dichoso clamaba: << ¡De manera que esa alma que estoy a punto de licenciar en nombre de la ciencia es una realidad que tales prodigios engendra, cuando la encarna un Dante! ¡Pues vale más entonces que todos sus negadores!>>

<<Ea, levántate. ¿Qué importa la aflicción si tenemos que subir todavía más alto...?>>, y <<No es descansando en blandos cojines como se llega a alcanzar la gloria...>>

Newton, y Comte, y Spencer, catalogadores de hechos... ninguno merecía el nombre de filósofo. Penetrar la maraña de los hechos para descubrir el hilo conductor, remover y animar la entraña misma de la creación, eso es ser un filósofo.

Y hubiera querido tener poder para convocar a la ciudad con dianas y repiques, y una vez reunidas las gentes en las plazas y azoteas, pregonarles la buena nueva, el *leit motiv* dantesco: <<Un mismo amor mueve las almas y las estrellas.>> Y un júbilo resonante gritaría en todas las bocas: <<Así sea>> y danzarían los cuerpos danzas de dicha.

Por lo pronto, la sin par lectura me contuvo en el descenso que me arrastraba. Me desató el poder del vuelo; me hizo ver desdeñables todos los tropiezos.<sup>57</sup>

This scene of reading articulates the aesthetic functionality Vasconcelos's assigns to works of literature: the proper regulation and management of the subject's desires. First, it is the experience of a *living* word – reading Dante meant leaving behind the “conceited” and “mean” jargon of contemporary philosophy, the language of the school. Through the same movement, he accused the dead letter of Law and the dead bodies of Medicine of mis-directing human desire towards despair, turning possibility into unproductive waste. In a happy turn of phrase, Vasconcelos writes about the dangers of “licenciar” the soul, which can mean both to decommission the soul and to grant it a professional degree, to make it a “licenciado.” Dante is praised on the condition that his “lesson” is not expressed in the language of distinction, argumentation and classification, but rather through a “music” that “penetrates and fortifies.” How can this be, when Vasconcelos read Dante in Spanish? We'll see. For now, let us notice that, while incapable of possessing Maria, it is Vasconcelos who is possessed by Dante. Consciousness is restituted to its “native powers” as a result of this possession – the release Vasconcelos found neither in María's body nor in writing is achieved by turning himself into the object of possession. And this new-found *eros* was precisely the *Comedy's* “lesson:” that absolute desire moves both stars and souls.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Vasconcelos, 188.

<sup>58</sup> Of course, the city did not put Dante in Vasconcelos's path by chance; it was Vasconcelos who formulated the relation between city, decadence and Dante through his writing. So, the question emerges: why Dante? But the question can be also reformulated as: why not Goethe? Indeed, Dante represented an alternative to the Ateneo's German literary icon. As both Reyes and Vasconcelos recalled in their autobiographical writings, the four nuclear members of the group – Antonio Caso, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, Vasconcelos and Reyes – used to discuss literary and philosophical problems deep into the night in Antonio Caso's domestic library. Just as the statue of Ariel oversees Prospero's lecture in Rodó's *Ariel*, a bust of Goethe presided over their meetings. For Caso, Reyes and Henríquez Ureña (as well as for Rodó), Goethe represented the paradigm of an aesthetic subject: novelist, poet, official functionary, amateur scientist, an all-round, integral, fully developed individual. For Vasconcelos, however, Goethe was a kind of organic intellectual, someone who had found a comfortable position within the State apparatus of his time. He also thought Goethe's “affirmation” of life was superficial and outright reactionary. One night, Reyes and Vasconcelos almost got into a fistfight over their contrasting interpretations of Goethe. In this sense, Vasconcelos's choice of Dante points towards the Catholic notion of history as movement towards divine redemption, as well as to the poet's position as an exile and a defeated political figure when writing the *Comedy*.

Despite Vasconcelos's exulted prose, the immediate effect of Dante on the young man is purely pragmatic: to get his act together. This meant, first of all, a momentary return to the dead language of the school: "Al volver a los libros de curso para salvar aquel año de estudios que se perdía, el contraste hacía sufrir. El Derecho Romano y la Ley Civil eran círculos infernales que debía atravesar sin Virgilio y sin Beatrices, pero eran peldaños de mi escala y se hacía menester treparlos 'con ánimo sereno.'"<sup>59</sup> Previously, Vasconcelos described the aesthetic encounter with Dante in the language of the skies: reading restituted the power of flight, gave back its wings to the soul. Now, the vertical character of the experience is reinforced by interpreting university examinations as hellish circles that are nonetheless "steps" in a ladder of spiritual ascent. The image of the ladder illustrates the nature of the reconciliation with the present offered by aesthetic experience. That is, it implies an acceptance of the present only as it is *opened* to the possibility of a redeemed future. Restituting consciousness to its "native powers" meant a paradoxical kind of remembering: one that takes hold of actuality through the remembrance of a different future. After much studying, Vasconcelos passed all his final examinations and saved the school year.

In his theoretical writings, Vasconcelos referred to this transformative quality of beauty as an *aesthetic reversal*. Some of these abstract reflections find their way into the memoirs as well. Vasconcelos's philosophical aesthetics were a sui generis mix of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century European idealisms (especially Henri Bergson's and Benedetto Croce's), Platonism (as presented in the works of German Hellenists such as Wilhelm Windelband and Eduard Zeller) and an odd appropriation of Indian and Oriental trends (mostly done through English-speaking orientalists).<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Vasconcelos, *Memorias I*, 189.

<sup>60</sup> For an analysis of Mexican "orientalism" see Mauricio Tenorio, "Japan" and "India," in *I Speak of the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). In these two chapters, Tenorio discusses both Mexico's orientalist (Japanese and Indian) dreams and Mexico itself as an orientalist idea. With the term "odalisque mania" he demarcates a period in time, from the 1860's to the 1940's, and defines the main characteristics of this Mexican orientalism: "the allure of the alien; the wisdom of what is ancient; the sensuality of a variant sexuality; and the sublimity of longevity and

Beyond his overarching philosophy, two things ought to be said about the relation between desire and art implied in the *aesthetic reversal*. First, that the aesthetic reversal implied a way of *looking* at an object: “Penetro con la vista amorosa en el seno del objeto, y al concebirlo en función de belleza le cambio el equilibrio atómico y transformo el arreglo mecánico en ritmo de júbilo. Toda belleza se distingue con el signo de un ritmo en marcha [...] Sin milagro de avatares no hay belleza”<sup>61</sup> To consider an object under the light of beauty – to penetrate it with loving sight, as Vasconcelos phrases it – means to consider it as a moment in its path towards the Absolute. Thus, beauty is never fully incarnate in any object – it is simply a trace of movement, a promise of itself. As we have seen, the *Divine Comedy* represented this movement, an *eros* that moved both human and heavenly bodies.

Second, by contemplating the aesthetic object as a moment towards the Absolute, the subject itself becomes a moment in this the path. It loses itself only to be reconstituted as the consciousness of movement and thus as a *self-determined* personality: “La estética contiene un esfuerzo inverso del ordinario. Primero se cumple la labor de la creación y en ella nuestro propio espíritu conquista sentido y tarea; después, y garantizada la personalidad, iniciamos con la emoción estética un desbordamiento y un fluir constructivo, dotado de rumbo.”<sup>62</sup> The aesthetic object and subject are thus linked in a process of mutual formation in which they are but instances of one another. They are, in quite a literal sense, inter-penetrated.

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authenticity” (212). For a more specific view on Vasconcelos’s fully *orientalist* work – *Estudios indostánicos*, from 1920 – and its relationship with the notion of a cosmic race, see Laura J. Torres Rodríguez, “Orientalizing Mexico: *Estudios indostánicos* and the place of India in José Vasconcelos’s *La raza cósmica*,” *Revista Hispánica Moderna* 68, no. 1 (June 2015): 77-91.

<sup>61</sup> Vasconcelos, *Memoirs I* 246.

<sup>62</sup> Vasconcelos, 271.

As for María, we shall never know how her charms would have fared against Dante's. One month before the university examinations, she presumably left the city in order to visit her family in Guanajuato and is only briefly mentioned again many episodes later, when Vasconcelos's is already "free" from his obsession. This is a fitting end for a character that was little more than a chance to explore Vasconcelos's narcissistic desire. Through María's narrative position as a figuration of Vasconcelos's desire for its own self, we can glimpse the workings of a students' culture completely dominated by young men. The liaison between a middle-class, Law student and a poor waitress ("humildes faldas") was of necessity a play of desires nurtured by social differences. The couple was quite aware of this: "En los cafés del barrio la acogían saludándola por su nombre; al principio me presentaba: <<Mi estudiante...>> <<Hola, el estudiante de María>>, me llamaban a mí cuando me presentaba a buscarla, alguna noche que no había logrado dar con ella."<sup>63</sup> One of María's friends likes to introduce Vasconcelos to other people with special deference: "<<El señor es un letrado>> decía presentándome."<sup>64</sup> Cultural capital is transformed into sex appeal. But in this, again, María is but an image of Vasconcelos's desire, a mirror into which he looks in order to observe himself wasting away.

The narrative arc of four chapters – "En Jurisprudencia," "La pendiente," "Connatos de pasión," and "Chorro de claridad" – thus enacts the restitution of mutilated desire through aesthetic experience. The 'fallen' status of desire was the result of its relation to a dead language (the language of the Law School, but also Vasconcelos's own language, his writing frustration) and to dead bodies (the cadavers in Hospital Juárez; María's body as the site of obsessive sexual desire). If the aesthetic experience could function as a restoration of desire, it was because its nature was

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<sup>63</sup> Vasconcelos, 184.

<sup>64</sup> Vasconcelos, 184.

akin to an erotic experience: not that of possession, but of being possessed. This possession produces a reversal from wastefulness into action and creation. In other words, a transformation from Vasconcelos's mutilated desire to the *Comedy's* divine *eros*. This *eros* was intimately related to a different experience of time: it was a scission in the everyday through which the fresh air of a redeemed future reached the present. In this sense, desire and time were intertwined in the aesthetic experience: it was a promise of happiness, like a nineteenth-century French novelist wrote.

#### *IV. The Long Daydream: From Professionalization to an Aristocracy of Spirit*

At the beginning of this chapter, it was said that only as part of a social project involving the creation of a spiritual aristocracy could the idea of individual waste acquire pathos. It is time to develop this statement. This natural aristocracy was to be produced by the school and the university, and its historic role was to substitute the military and land-owning aristocracies in power for an enlightened, civil government. As we saw, this was the class-allegiance between the middle and lower classes that Vasconcelos imagined happening in the classroom. This allegiance would not simply mean the passive assimilation of the lower classes into middle class culture, but the creation of a third category that could overcome the immediate social differences between the two - the educated. The hegemonic dimension of *arielismo* indeed involved the creation of a particular subject, but this subject cannot be reduced to a national or transnational identity, such as *Latin Americanism* or any such other. Rather, *arielismo* (in an effort both mirroring and denying professionalization) required the acquisition of a set of qualifications that could distinguish an individual as intellectually and culturally prestigious, belonging not to Latin America but to the *best* of Latin America and ultimately to the best of mankind. First amongst these was, of course, a particular way of writing.

At the time of writing his memoirs in the late 1930's, Vasconcelos considered the Mexican Revolution as the expression of the educated, professional classes' will to power. In other words, he considered *maderismo* – 'civil' society's critique of military liberalism – as identical with the legitimate aspirations of the Revolution: "México tenía pan y quizá más seguro que en cualquier otro período de su historia; pero anhelaba lo que no puede dar un tirano: libertades. Por ansia de libertades y por encono contra gentes que aprovechaban la influencia oficial en sus negocios particulares, México respondió al llamado maderista [emphasis mine]."<sup>65</sup> Never mind the exploitation of workers, labor demands or their violent repression by the military. The problem was, as noted, that the Porfirian regime had become a kind of aristocracy that obstructed the development and exploitation of talent for national interest. If revolutionary violence erupted suddenly, this process was akin to the accumulation of steam that finally blows off a repressive lid. In Vasconcelos's interpretation, it was the frustrated desire of the educated classes which blew off the Porfirian regime. When Madero took power it was the prospect of an educated elite which most excited Vasconcelos: "Todo prometía una serie de gobernantes, ya no abortos de cuartel ni de jefes de banda, sino universitarios y hombres de idea, lo mismo que en el resto de la América Española, ya no digo en Europa y los Estados Unidos."<sup>66</sup> In turn, the removal of the Porfirian aristocracy meant an opportunity for the economy to fully thrive, since private investment was not anymore hindered by corrupt dealings: "Bien se advertía en mi bufete el efecto de aquella renovada confianza en nuestra nación. Instancias administrativas en gestión de empresas, casi todas nuevas, ocupaban mis horas."<sup>67</sup> It was a liberal utopia in which the free play of individual talent mirrored the free circulation of capital, both national and international. In the memoirs, Vasconcelos is quick

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<sup>65</sup> Vasconcelos, *Memorias I*, 321.

<sup>66</sup> Vasconcelos, 404.

<sup>67</sup> Vasconcelos, 404.

to censure any other formulation of the Revolution's meaning as a falsification of its historical origin and truth, *maderismo*.

And yet, the fact that Vasconcelos considered the educated, professional classes as the historical agent of this transformation also meant that they were the fundamental object of his critique.<sup>68</sup> As we have seen, his narration of Mexican classrooms as sites for the creation of cultural capital (the civilized body of a gentleman) reveals a process of waste rather than accomplishment. And, as we shall now see, his description of professional work is the logical step forward in this process, both a continuation and a deepening. The paradox was, then, that the educated classes would themselves have to be transformed before they could accomplish their historical mission – a transformation that had to take place outside of the school and outside of work. In a sense, the transformation *was* the historical mission, for the military and landowning aristocracies could only be displaced by a different kind of aristocracy, and thus the victory of the Revolution depended on the emergence of this new elite. For all their worth, a bunch of lawyers, entrepreneurs, doctors, engineers and other un-romantic, un-heroic types certainly were not fit to dwell on the Mount Olympus of national glory. The spiritual (cultural) aristocracy needed to fill this space could only emerge as the overcoming of professionalization and the professional self.<sup>69</sup> For Vasconcelos, this

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<sup>68</sup> José Joaquín Blanco's *Se llamaba Vasconcelos: Una evocación crítica* is the best reading of Vasconcelos's memoirs in terms of social class that I know of. For Blanco, Vasconcelos's revolutionary politics were related to a *petit-bourgeois* utopia: family, small ownership of land, work, high culture. In this sense, his interpretation is perhaps too literal and borders on the complete identification of Vasconcelos with the middle-classes – Vasconcelos as a kind of Weberian ideal-type. Blanco also takes note of Vasconcelos's obsession with waste, although he does not discuss the subject at length. See José Joaquín Blanco, *Se llamaba Vasconcelos: Una evocación crítica* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1977).

<sup>69</sup> Julio Ramos describes the notion of "culture" operative during the last decades of the 19th century and the first of the 20th as "un paradójico dispositivo de adaptación a las exigencias de la modernidad, al requisito de especialización que el capitalismo imponía como modelo a los diferentes tipos de trabajo. *Paradójico* modo de adaptarse, porque si bien estos intelectuales responden a la división del trabajo con una insistente voluntad autónoma, legitiman y representan esa autonomía como condición de su crítica a la especialización." See *Desencuentros*, "Masa, Cultura, Latinoamericanismo," 211. While Vasconcelos could certainly transcend (if only momentarily) his professional status through the consumption of 'high' culture, it is less clear that he could do so in the realm of production, as we'll see.



transformation was essentially aesthetic. It involved, not the absolute suppression of professional work, but the investment of “surplus” energy – the excessive remainders of energy after work – into the creation of high culture.<sup>70</sup> This investment, as a distinction and an overcoming of work, received in the language of aesthetics the name of “play.” We shall now consider the interaction between work (both professional and technical) and high culture (understood as play) in *Ulises Criollo*, in relation to the emergence of a cultural aristocracy that could legitimately substitute the military and landowning elites.

Vasconcelos had an extremely successful career as a private lawyer. His relationship to professional success was, however, paradoxical. Professional work was experienced as the frustration of creative energy and a waste of valuable time. This experience was not the relative result of professional success or failure but a constant attitude in the narration of Vasconcelos’s life. He describes his first job as a scribe in a legal office, still in his student days, as a sophisticated technique of torture: “Tener en la cabeza la ambición de escribir un ensayo sobre la manera como la voluntad de Schopenhauer se transforma en goce estético, y en las manos una pluma que copia las cláusulas de una compraventa de inmuebles, constituye un suplicio tan refinado como agotador.”<sup>71</sup> Years later, after Madero’s movement triumphed and Vasconcelos’s prestige as a lawyer was at its highest, the feeling was still the same: “El dinero seguía entrando en mi caja por honorarios legítimos, sin cobrar un peso del gobierno; pero aun esta corriente de oro me entristecía. Mis actividades estaban muy lejos de la meditación para la cual me creía nacido.”<sup>72</sup> And yet,

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<sup>70</sup> The notion of a “surplus” of energies is related to George Bataille’s formulation of “excess” as the residual amount of vital energies after a day of work which must be invested in non-productive activity. For Bataille, the failure to spend this residual energy through civilized forms of the non-productive – such as art or eroticism – would necessarily produce social unrest and even violent explosions of unspent passion in the form of war. See *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: New York Zone Books, 1991).

<sup>71</sup> Vasconcelos, *Memorias I*, 213.

<sup>72</sup> Vasconcelos, 408.

besides the years he spent as Minister of Education in Álvaro Obregón's government, he never abandoned his private practice.

The valuation of professional work as necessary but second-in-importance in relation to cultural or creative activity is in fact one of the defining traits of *arielismo*, one of its strongest ideological claims. In *Ariel*, one of the images Prospero used to illustrate the condition of professional workers was that of Cleanthes, a Greek slave forced to carry water all day but who saves his interior freedom, and thus his true dignity, by meditating on philosophical questions in his moments of rest.<sup>73</sup> Vasconcelos imagines his professional self in much the same way in the memoirs, although his narration reveals an unaddressed problem in Prospero's compromise between professional work and high culture. After graduation, earning good money as an official clerk in Durango, Vasconcelos spends his free time writing treatises on aesthetics. At the sight of the dubious results (which he nonetheless shares with the readers, perhaps hoping they are not as bad as he thinks) he exclaims with resignation: "Podrán parecer pobres estas reflexiones y aun serlo; pero tal juicio no alivia la carga del esfuerzo que me costó alcanzarlas. Lecturas extensas y varias de filósofos, reflexiones en la soledad con sacrificios de pasatiempos y complacencias; rápidos atisbos conquistados sobre la cotidiana vulgaridad. Doble vida del esclavo social que ha de disputar su pan y el alma que exige ocio contemplativo indispensable a su esencia."<sup>74</sup> If Prospero had hoped for a fruitful compromise between professional life and high culture, Vasconcelos's narration raises some doubts about this possibility. A culture constructed on stolen moments from professional work could not finally amount to much. That high culture might itself

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<sup>73</sup> José Enrique Rodó, *Ariel*, ed. Pablo Rocca (Sevilla: Editorial Renacimiento, 2019), 84. Although stoic philosopher Cleanthes was never actually a slave, his image as a slave-philosopher widely circulated within European intellectuals working on Hellenistic culture, such as Walter Pater, Ernst Renan and Jules Michelet. Furthermore, Cleanthes was only one in a series of illustrious slaves that also included fellow stoic Epictetus and the Roman playwright Plautus, who supposedly had to work as a slave to pay off his debts.

<sup>74</sup> Vasconcelos, 247.

be professionalized was something that Vasconcelos (and Prospero) saw with deep suspicion. Many of his disagreements with Alfonso Reyes, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, Antonio Caso and others can be interpreted on the basis of this refusal to professionalize high culture.

More precisely, professional work as a lawyer implied for Vasconcelos a waste of written language - copying the clauses of a legal agreement prevents the creation of an essay on Schopenhauer's aesthetics. But, as we have seen, work was not the only thing preventing Vasconcelos from writing. His own struggle to find the appropriate language for his "invaluable" essence was also a big part. This frustration was heightened by Vasconcelos's involvement with the Ateneo de la Juventud, a group of young intellectuals intending to carry out a humanist reform of culture.<sup>75</sup> That his humanist colleagues – which included Antonio Caso, Pedro Henríquez Ureña and Alfonso Reyes – could express themselves with apollonian precision made Vasconcelos resentful of precision itself. This resentment took the form of an attack towards academicism, the professional jargon for discussing works of high culture. The accumulated frustration with professional languages erupts (like a minor revolution) in an almost negligible moment when Vasconcelos is working for an American legal firm in Mexico City. Although his income keeps increasing, his own cultural unimportance weighs upon him like a stone: "Las peripecias del profesional oscuro me ocasionaban heridas de amor propio, aparte de fatiga y disgusto por la índole misma de la labor."<sup>76</sup> He then takes a piece of office paper – "pliego que ostenta el membrete de la firma Warner, Johnson y Galston" – and writes a brief meditation on Schopenhauer. The gist of

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<sup>75</sup> The best accounts of the Ateneo's cultural enterprise can still be found in the works of Fernando Curiel. See *La revuelta: interpretación del Ateneo de la Juventud (1906-1929)* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1998) and *Ateneo de la Juventud (A-Z)* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas, 2001). For a succinct and more recent account, see Pedro Ángel Palou's "The Ateneo de la Juventud: The Foundations of Mexican Intellectual Culture," in *A History of Mexican Literature*, ed. Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, Anna M. Nogar and José Ramón Ruisánchez Serra (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>76</sup> Vasconcelos, *Memorias I*, 272.

the piece was the German pessimist's neglect by the official academy for most of his life, in favor of Hegel. Vasconcelos, addressing Arthur personally, advises to pay no mind to mere academic prestige: "Pues mucho padece el gran desdeñoso que eres, cuando se exhibe recreándose en el fallo de un jurado de catedráticos. No te dejes llevar de la parte menor de ti mismo, que es la que ha podido sentirse rival de Hegel. Déjale al flamante profesor el aplauso entero de sus iguales. Tú no eres ídolo de escuela ni te entalla la librea del académico. También hay la clase media filosófica: déjala *hegelianizar*..."<sup>77</sup> Stolen from the hours of work as a lawyer, this brief moment of personal writing might not be a pinnacle of culture, but it certainly functions as a miniature ritual. Through the figure of Schopenhauer Vasconcelos transforms his failures at writing into an attack on the emergent language of professional criticism. More importantly, by writing this attack on personalized office paper, the preeminence of the language of high culture is metaphorically (and perhaps as a form of compensation) affirmed over the language of professional work. This ritualistic *writing over* enacts the redemptive structure of the aesthetic experience.

At the same time that he held such views, Vasconcelos was undoubtedly proud of his professional work. The fact that he belonged to the private sector meant in his version of things that he was clean of politics' crimes. The complex relations between the professional classes, international capital and the military liberalism of the Porfirian regime are not an explicit object of analysis in the memoirs, even though Vasconcelos worked at an American firm translating sales contracts of Mexican land to foreign investors during the immediate years prior to the Revolution. To be a *professional* politician, to depend on government for monetary income, immediately casted doubt over a person, since their political or philosophical positions could not be taken as disinterested. Vasconcelos always held against Venustiano Carranza that he was a senator in the

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<sup>77</sup> Vasconcelos, 272.

regime he later overthrew. That Carranza could be a senator for Díaz and then President of a revolutionary government meant simply that Carranza wanted to be a powerful politician, no matter the scenario, no matter the ideological context. Madero could be a saint precisely because he was never a politician: a large private business was a prerequisite for canonization. And Vasconcelos himself, as he narrates it in the memoirs, was from a young age convinced of the necessity of intervening in politics only on extraordinary occasions, always to come back to private life. A private income was the guarantee of political good faith, philosophical clear-headedness and also the irrefutable evidence that one could bring about prosperity.

Vasconcelos's ambiguous attitude towards professional work was extended to technical and manual labor. He certainly hoped that the class alliance he had imagined happening in the school was reproduced in the sphere of work. In the memoirs' narration, this alliance was quite literally sealed in blood – it involved the death of Vasconcelos's favorite younger brother, Carlos. Around 1908, when Vasconcelos was working for Warner, Johnson and Galston, Carlos was fired from his job at a commercial firm, age twenty-one. Infatuated by his own professional success, Vasconcelos encouraged Carlos to put into action an old plan: travelling to the United States to work as a mechanic and study at a technical school, then to come back to Mexico and put-up shop or work with a railroad company. Vasconcelos promised Carlos to help him financially, yet a good school was out of the question: "El plan no podía ser mejor; pero no podíamos pagar un colegio formal. Son caros los institutos técnicos, las universidades. En cambio, en las escuelas auxiliares de mecánicos enseñan sin exigir preparación escolar de importancia."<sup>78</sup> It was a strenuous undertaking, but mainly a good chance for Carlos to develop character and acquire valuable technical skills. In a sense, the plan was an extension of Vasconcelos's faith in his own

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<sup>78</sup> Vasconcelos, 278.

extraordinary energies: “No se me escapó que lo empujaba a una empresa dura y de las que ponen a prueba un carácter. Pero yo también me sostenía a fuerza de tenacidad y me halagaba sentir en el hermano predilecto madera que resiste el temporal.”<sup>79</sup> Sadly, in this case the tree did not resist the tempest. After a couple of years working in Philadelphia at a mechanical factory and studying at nights, Carlos returned to Mexico thin and pale with a fatal case of tuberculosis. At his funeral, and from that moment on, Vasconcelos was subject to a deep guilt, recognizing the determining hand of his own vanity in Carlos demise. Looking at his younger brother’s grave, he thought: “¿Conque esto es todo? ¿Quién hablará más del pobre joven que no llegó a nada, que no tuvo oportunidad de manifestar si había en él un héroe, si algo suyo merecía el renombre”<sup>80</sup> Young, promising and once full of life, Carlos is now one more dead body in the anonymous grave of human waste. And this dead body could not be imputed to Porfirio Díaz and his minions.

Or could it? Going over Carlos’ personal belongings, Vasconcelos found out that his brother had been affiliated to a mechanical worker’s union in Philadelphia. He also reflected inevitably on the relation between Carlos’ death and the kind of work he did: the fumes involved in the factory’s work must have mortally damaged his lungs. If Vasconcelos saw Carlos as an extension of his own energy, then Carlos’ death presented another social condition which led effectively to the waste of human capital. This double identification between Carlos as an extension of Vasconcelos, and Vasconcelos as a possible Carlos, leads in the memoirs to a symbolic allegiance between Vasconcelos and the working classes. The way that Vasconcelos found of assimilating the working classes’ interests into his notion of the Revolution curiously involved substituting the military by a kind of workers’ militia:

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<sup>79</sup> Vasconcelos, 279.

<sup>80</sup> Vasconcelos, 394.

Dentro de uno de sus libros encontré una cinta, distintivo de la Unión Obrera a que se había afiliado: Federación de Mecánicos. Y me lo representé desfilando en primero de mayo por las avenidas de Filadelfia, en muda protesta contra la vida dura del obrero... Era como una de tantas víctimas del Moloch del progreso. Pero lo injusto es que tales sacrificios los determinaba la pobreza. Debieran repartirse los riesgos, según lo predicaba William James, igual que los de la guerra, entre toda la juventud. Una nueva milicia destinada a vencer las fuerzas naturales, más esforzada y gloriosa que los ejércitos de la matanza humana. El servicio en las minas, en los talleres, equivalente moral de la guerra, iría creando una tradición de heroísmo, mucha más elevado que el del militar. No me quedaba sino una manera digna de honrar el sacrificio de mi hermano. Contribuir, en lo posible, a que casos como el suyo no se repitiesen. Dedicar toda mi acción política a la defensa del obrero, a la protección de los intereses humildes. Sólo así conquistaría de nuevo el derecho a la luz... Propiciando la revolución en toda su generosa universalidad.<sup>81</sup>

Beyond the sentimental and triumphant final performance of solidarity, the passage itself is very nuanced. It fully assumes the domination of nature as the legitimate ideology of technical work. This is expressed through the analogy of war that structures the passage. Vasconcelos calls workers “victims to the Moloch of progress,” only to immediately remark that the quid of the injustice lies in the fact that people are forced by poverty to take these risks (Vasconcelos did not send Carlos to a university for lack of sufficient money). Just like in a regular war, the war against nature should involve the democratic distribution of risk between the citizens’ young bodies. Instead of a military service, every young man should spend some time working in the mines or in the fabrics. Following James, Vasconcelos calls the kind of work involved in the domination of nature the “moral equivalent of war”- a war that is not only morally justified, but that itself is a moral action. Workers were thus revolutionaries themselves, involved in their own war to subdue and transform nature.

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<sup>81</sup> Vasconcelos, 396. James’ argument to replace military conscription and re-direct youth’s patriotism towards the material progress of the nation through work can be found in his late essay “The Moral Equivalent of War” (1910), itself derived from a speech at Stanford given in 1906. The historical point of departure for James’ essay were the Spanish American war of 1898 and the following annexation of the Philippines. The essay had a profound impact both in Spanish America and the US – its lasting influence can be seen in President Jimmy Carter’s famous speech on oil crisis as late as 1977. See William James, *The Moral Equivalent of War* (New York: American Association for International Conciliation, 1910).

In the language of modern aesthetic theory, the world of work could be transcended (although not fully suppressed) through a praxis of “play.” Indeed, within an aesthetic conception of the arts, high culture repeatedly defined itself as a superior - for some even divine - kind of game. In this, modern aesthetic theory again reproduces a humanist topic: readers of Spanish early modern prose might remember the prologue to the *Novelas Ejemplares* (1613), in which Cervantes compares his Italian-influenced *novelas* to a “*mesa de trucos*,” an early modern sibling of contemporary billiards: “Mi intento ha sido poner en la plaza de nuestra república una mesa de trucos, donde cada uno pueda llegar a entretenerse, sin daño de barras; digo, sin daño del alma ni del cuerpo, porque los ejercicios honestos y agradables antes aprovechan que dañan.”<sup>82</sup> Some hundred and fifty years later, in post-Kantian language, Friedrich Schiller famously exclaimed that “man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays.”<sup>83</sup> And, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, José Enrique Rodó, an admirer of Schiller, described the origins of Greek culture (and thus of Culture) as the play of divine children: “Pero de aquel divino juego de niños, sobre las playas del Archipiélago y a la sombra de los olivos de Jonia, nacieron el arte, la filosofía, el pensamiento libre, la curiosidad de la

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<sup>82</sup> Miguel de Cervantes, *Novelas Ejemplares* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2015), 55. *Diccionario de Autoridades* defines “Mesa de trucos” as: “La que se dispone para el juego que llaman assí. Es larga como de seis varas, y como dos de ancho, vestida de paño, con una barandilla o borde sobrepuesto al rededor, y asegurado, y dividido a trechos con unas troneras formadas en arco, y de una a otra las que llaman tablillas, vestidas de paño y embutidas de borra. En las dos cabeceras de la mesa se colocan las que llaman Barra y bolillo, y se afianza y nivela con grande exactitud. Latín. *Trudicolorum tabula*.” It also defines the game of “Truco” as: “Suerte del juego llamado los Trucos, que consiste en echar la bola del contrario por alguna de las troneras con la propia bola, lo qual se llama truco baxo, y alto quando se echa por encima de la varandilla, y vale dos rayas. Lat. *Globuli extra tabulam missio, vel infrà per fenestellam, vel suprà tabulatum vallum*.”

<sup>83</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1967), 107. In 1822, José de la Luz y Caballero translated a German article on Schiller’s life and works for Cuban newspapers. See *Escritos literarios*, prolog. Raimundo Lazo (Havana: Editorial de la Universidad de la Habana, 1946) and Julio Ramos, *Desencuentros*, footnote, page 206. A full translation of Schiller’s *Letters* into Spanish was published by Espasa-Calpe in 1919, the work of Spanish priest and philosopher Manuel García Morente (1886-1942). García Morente’s translation was quite a success and was republished in 1920, 1928, 1932 and 1952.



investigación, la conciencia de la dignidad humana...”<sup>84</sup> Indeed, the image of Greece and classical Athens as the young, child-like, unspecialized phase of world-history (an origin that was also a *telos*) was a literary common-place at the turn of the century, from Jules Michelet to José Martí.

In all of these cases, the relation of play to work cannot be characterized as pure negation. What the notions of “play” and “game” imply, in the aesthetic sense, is not an absolute suppression of work but an activity in which the distinction between work and leisure no longer obtains. If play was related to work in a purely negative fashion, as *rest*, then work would still be the dominant element of the equation. Only by collapsing the distinction between work and leisure can play *redeem* work in its own sphere. The resulting experience – beauty – is defined by Schiller as simultaneously an active passivity and a passive activity, a state in which the faculties are both taut and at ease. Only in the aesthetic state of play, beyond the dichotomy between work and rest, could individual and social energies find absolute fulfillment; only in play were they exercised for their own enjoyment, not as means but as autonomous ends.<sup>85</sup>

In *Ulises Criollo*, however, the transformation of surplus energy into the play of art appears as the trace of an unsatisfied desire. As the presence of an absence, frustrated desire shows itself

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<sup>84</sup> José Enrique Rodó, *Ariel*, 67.

<sup>85</sup> The aesthetic preoccupation with the distinction between work and play was a central concern for Marxist theory since its inception, and it is still a fundamental issue in the works of such notable American Marxists as Stanley Aronowitz: “The question that I wish to deal with [...] is what is an adequate theory of the interior determinations of working class life (and now of course of the life of the middle strata) that permit the reproduction both of the relations of production and reproduction of labor power such that there is also a reproduction of the segregation between work and play. For when you cross the line between work and play, and work becomes ‘playful’, and people being to perceive that they can make their work intrinsically satisfying -either by self-management or by control or by the reorganization of the labour process such that it meets their newly defined needs- then there develops a crisis in leisure when the concept of leisure is revealed as an ideological production. For the concept of leisure depends on a specific definition of alienation; alienation as deferred time. It is the deferment, it is the absence of time for oneself which defines the capacity of the work/play dichotomy to be maintained, and also for it to be reproduced. When people are no longer willing to defer time for play, and insist that it be an activity which is continuous with their life existence, then you have a very serious problem for the reproduction of the relations of production as well as the reproduction of labour power.” See Stanley Aronowitz, “On the Theorisation of Leisure,” in *Urban Political Economy and Social Theory*, ed. Ray Forrest, Jeff Henderson and Peter Williams (Brookfield, Vermont: Gower Publishing Company, 1982).

in a two-fold manner. First, as pure negation in the form of abuse towards “degraded” forms of play. Contrary to the formulations of art and philosophy as “divine play” that here and there appear in the memoirs, mundane games are passionately attacked as a shallow waste of time. As a student, Vasconcelos never condescended to spend a night playing cards: “Yo he detestado siempre los juegos. Veo en ellos la más tonta manera de usar el más precioso tesoro de cada existencia, su tiempo, limitado, contado y que, por lo mismo, es necesario exprimir, aprovechar, gozar, en ultimo caso sufrir, pero nunca, jamás, desperdiciar.”<sup>86</sup> Rather than directing surplus energy towards the play of art, mundane games were related to the realm of waste. In a sense, they represented an even deeper waste than lust, since in lust one rejoiced and suffered, but never lost time in a purely negative fashion. Furthermore, as Schiller had written, one could know everything about the character of an individual or a people, not by their work but by the forms in which they satisfied their need for play. For Vasconcelos, one could also know everything about someone’s political culture. Madero could be distinguished from both the barbarism that came before him and the one that came after him on account of the way he spent his free time:

Pero entre picadores y novilleros hallan sus íntimos los Victoriano Huerta y los Calles. Madero fue una vez a los toros por ayudar a una <<gloria nacional>>; fue una vez y no volvió. En cambio, se le veía en su palco cada vez que la Sinfónica tocaba un concierto. Su rostro Luminoso se dejaba llevar de la melodía, entregada la frente a pensamientos nobles [...] Antes, el Presidente [sic] iba a los gallos; ahora disfrutaba la vena melódica plena de emoción generosa. Después, los presidentes irían a los toros... para gustar de la sangre vertida sin riesgo del espectador.<sup>87</sup>

Indeed, the mark of civilization could never be ascribed to the necessity of work; it was in the *superficial*, the *unnecessary* and the *excessive* where the quality of a culture revealed itself.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Vasconcelos, *Memorias I*, 179.

<sup>87</sup> Vasconcelos, 422-42.

<sup>88</sup> The bull-fighting reference is also found in Schiller: “If (to confine ourselves to the modern world) we compare horse-racing in London, bull-fights in Madrid, *spectacles* in the Paris of former days, the gondola races in Venice, animal-baiting in Vienna, and the gay attractive life of the Corso in Rome, it will not be difficult to determine the different nuances of taste among these different peoples.” *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 107.

More importantly, however, I would argue that the frustrated desire of play appears not only as pure negation but in the form of a *forced displacement out* of the memoirs. Indeed, “play” is the most important concept in a pedagogical essay Vasconcelos published in 1935, less than a year before the first volume of the memoirs appeared: *De Robinson a Odiseo*. From its title, the essay immediately establishes a relation with the memoirs. In *De Robinson...* Vasconcelos sketched a general outline of the philosophy of education he implemented during his tenure as Minister of Education, from 1921 to 1924. It was a philosophy formulated in stark contrast to the works of John Dewey. In the revised edition of *The School and Society* (1915), Dewey sketched the function and importance for children to study History during elementary education. Certain passages are sure to have caught Vasconcelos’s eye: “When history is conceived as dynamic, as moving, its economic and industrial aspects are emphasized”; “The question of how human beings live, indeed, represents the dominant interest with which the child approaches historical material. It is this point of view which brings those who worked in the past close to the beings with whom he is daily associated, and confers upon him the gift of sympathetic penetration.”<sup>89</sup> From such passages, Vasconcelos mis-described Dewey’s pedagogy as the passive “adaptation” of every child to its social and natural environment. Even though Dewey discouraged the use of literary fictions such as Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) in elementary school, on account of the hero’s isolation from any social environment, in *De Robinson...* Vasconcelos described Dewey’s

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<sup>89</sup> John Dewey, “The Aim of History in Elementary Education,” *The School and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1915), 157. For a comparison, at the level of ideas, between Dewey and Vasconcelos, see Stanley D. Ivie, “A Comparison in Educational Philosophy: Jose Vasconcelos and John Dewey,” *Comparative Education Review* 10, no. 3 (1966): 404-17. For a more historical and institutional account, which describes two periods in Mexico’s official relation with Dewey’s pedagogy (a moment of radical experimentation, from 1915 to 1923, and its subsequent appropriation for projects of national homogenization), see Victor J. Rodriguez “Radical Dewey: Deweyan Pedagogy in Mexico, 1915–1923,” *Education and Culture* 29, no. 2 (2013): 71-97.

Robinson as the paradigm of an empiricist pedagogy, interested only in the means of survival, production and reproduction. To this misrepresentation of Dewey, Vasconcelos contraposed his own revolutionary notion of pedagogy: the aim of the school was not to reproduce existing social conditions but transform them. In the memoirs, Dewey's pedagogy is actually dismissed on the ground that it was an ideological strategy directed towards the children of the American working classes. Education as adaptation could at best secure a reliable work force, but never much more. Against this imaginary alliance between pedagogy and work, Vasconcelos defended a pedagogy based on the notion of "play" as the initiation of the child into the world of "adventure." Adventure was the antithesis of adaptation, a heroic view of life that implied danger, exposure, change, risk. The paradigmatic representation of this vital adventurer was, of course, Odysseus, with whom Vasconcelos self-identifies in the memoirs as Ulises. And the paradigmatic form of play, thus the ultimate point of departure for adventure, was the aesthetic enjoyment of works of art. Such was Vasconcelos's project of aesthetic education.

The fact that play is only present in the memoirs as negation and displacement is indicative of Vasconcelos's own struggles to transform surplus energy into meaningful aesthetic activity. It is also, more fundamentally, indicative of an incomplete and ultimately ambiguous theorization of the relations between work and culture within *arielismo*. In the case of Vasconcelos, the lack of clarity regarding the ultimate relations between work (his professional work as lawyer, Carlos' technical labor) and culture (the play of high art) resulted in a false negotiation that made the renunciation of mundanity the condition for aesthetic fulfillment. In other words, the failed reconciliation between the two spheres lead to an exclusive decision between the one or the other, an *either/or* situation:

La convicción de mi fracaso [at writing] determinaba largos períodos de esterilidad y pesimismo. Acaso lo mejor era embrutecerse de trabajo y hartarse de pequeños goces... Pero luego el hastío y el gusano interno, cuyo roer no cesa, volvían a despertarme la esperanza. Urgía trabajar, atesorar para lanzarse después a la gran renuncia. Por ahora el deber social, familiar, y más tarde la liberación para el cultivo del alma, igual que los filósofos de todos los tiempos.<sup>90</sup>

Indeed, throughout *Ulises Criollo* Vasconcelos enunciates a repeated wish: to save fifty-thousand pesos, buy a house in the countryside, abandon public life and dedicate his complete energies to reading, writing and contemplating nature. A big amount of money was necessary if Vasconcelos was to embark on this last of adventures, aesthetic monasticism, with a clear conscience: money enough to support his wife and children for life, whom he of course would have to abandon. However, the either/or figure of the relation between work and culture only resulted in the infinite postponement of aesthetic fulfillment – a little more money was always necessary, or a last political attempt, or a final fling of the flesh. Vasconcelos, of course, never retired into contemplative life. Rather than the effective transformation of energies into the play of high culture, the memoirs thus enact the infinite postponement of aesthetic production. In a very real sense, they are the expression of an *unhappy consciousness* that results from the failure to reconcile conceptually and vitally the demands of work and high culture.

It has been suggested that Vasconcelos's aesthetic project meant to compensate the agonism of politics and social struggle by constituting a natural community around the shared appreciation of humanist culture.<sup>91</sup> What the aesthetic project truly tried to suppress, it seems to

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<sup>90</sup> Vasconcelos, *Memorias I*, 312.

<sup>91</sup> See Horacio Legrás, "La voluntad revolucionaria. Sobre las memorias de José Vasconcelos," *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 33, no. 66 (2007): 53-76. Here, Legrás proposes a (surprising) genealogy that goes from Kant's ethics to Vasconcelos's memoirs. According to this narrative, Vasconcelos cultural politics failed, in so far as the humanist culture he sought to distribute turned out to already be informed by the agonism it sought to transcend. But there are, at least, a couple of things that ring odd in this argument. First, that there are no other Mexican writers (with the notable exceptions of Jorge Cuesta, Elena Garro and José Revueltas) with such an acute sense of cultural agonism as José Vasconcelos. And, secondly, that if Vasconcelos indeed was part of a humanist generation, he was probably the least humanistic of all, as proved by the repudiation of the human body in some of the best literary passages of the memoirs.

me, is work. Vasconcelos's aesthetic utopia would have the form of a society in which the maximum of energies is devoted to the creation or contemplation of beauty and the minimum to life-sustaining work. It was a utopian reversal of the bourgeoisie "general economy" of energy, forces and desires.<sup>92</sup> But the relation between these two activities, work and play, was never truly clarified either at the conceptual level or at the level of action. Because of this, the only way of imagining the realization of this utopia was by infinitely postponing it into the future. This was the case for both Vasconcelos's individual work and for his revolutionary imagination. At the end of his student dissertation, he envisaged an indefinite future in which industrial development would make all work unnecessary and life would be "a long daydream of infinite contemplation:"

Aceptemos, pues, la época presente, recibamos este industrialismo vulgar como transición dolorosa y necesaria que prepara un porvenir mejor. No están con él nuestras simpatías, pero perdonémoslo, porque no lo ahoga todo, aunque el trabajo y las máquinas invadan la tierra, siempre quedará en los cielos un espacio azul donde guardar los ideales. Nuestra raza latina poco adaptada para las tareas groseras, no irá a la cabeza de los pueblos llevando el estandarte triunfal en estas luchas casi mezquinas: seguirá resignada, un movimiento que comprende necesario y conservará su vigor intacto para cuando el ideal florezca, para cuando los industriales hayan puesto al alcance de todos la riqueza y sea la vida un largo ensueño de contemplación y de infinito.<sup>93</sup>

#### *V. Ulises' Wager: Style, Translation and Aesthetic Value*

For Vasconcelos, writing about his own life meant writing reflexively about his struggles with literary form. As we have seen, beyond every social 'obstacle' that prevented the transformation of surplus energy into the play of art, Vasconcelos fought a burdensome and for him somewhat shameful battle to attain the linguistic means needed to express his "singularly valuable essence."

At one level, Vasconcelos interpreted this "incapacity to form" as a mark of his philosophical

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<sup>92</sup> For Bataille, the study of a "general economy" involved expanding the notion of the economic to analyze a society in terms of the expenditure of its vital energies and desires. This notion stands in contrast to the study of "particular economy" and the restricted sense of the economic that is the object of professional economists.

<sup>93</sup> José Vasconcelos, *Teoría dinámica del derecho* (Mexico City: Tipografía Económica, 1907).

‘character’, a personal trait possessed since childhood: “Desde entonces me preocupaba el contenido y no la forma.”<sup>94</sup> Here, one could legitimately argue that the transformation of an impossibility into a necessity only reveals *resentment* towards literary language, a conclusion that Vasconcelos himself allows for by the way he describes his early struggles with literary composition as a student: “Tan pobres vi mis poemas que desistí para siempre de hacerlos, consolado con mi fama de metafísico y filósofo.”<sup>95</sup> However, rather than dissolving the tension into Vasconcelos’s psyche, here I will consider the contradiction between form and content as it is actually enacted in the memoirs, that is, as an unresolved figure. And rather than considering this antagonism as the product of Vasconcelos philosophical ‘character’ or in any purely idealist terms, it will be considered as the product of a particular relation between the school, professionalization and literary language. In turn, this will lead us to consider the relations between literary language and universal value – that is, the possibility of translating literary works into other languages. In this sense, the philosophical discussion regarding the relations between form and content in Vasconcelos’s memoirs is here understood in the context of a concrete strategy for the production of cultural prestige. Ultimately, it concerns both the relation that particular languages bear to Vasconcelos’s aesthetic brand of cultural politics as well as the possibility of satisfying the memoirs desire for immediate self-expression. In this last sense, the antagonism between form and content is not an element like any other in the memoirs, but one that regards the conditions of its own manufacture.

In *Ulises Criollo*, the antagonism between content and form defines Vasconcelos’s relations with his colleagues at the Ateneo de la Juventud. The Ateneo was above all a practice of

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<sup>94</sup> Vasconcelos, *Memorias I*, 14.

<sup>95</sup> Vasconcelos, 160.

public reading – its young members both attacked the cultural prestige of Porfirian positivism and laid the grounds for a new humanism (crucially influenced by José Enrique Rodó *Ariel*, through the mediation of Pedro Henríquez Ureña) in a series of lectures during the years immediately prior to the Revolution. In the memoirs, Vasconcelos characterized his participation in the Ateneo as mediocre: “Por otra parte, mi acción en aquel Ateneo, igual que en círculos semejantes, fue siempre mediocre. Lo que yo creía tener dentro no era para ser leído en cenáculos; casi ni para ser escrito. Cada intento de escribir me producía decepción y enojo. Se me embrollaba todo por *falta de estilo*, decía yo; en realidad, por falta de claridad en mi propia concepción.”<sup>96</sup> This lack of conceptual clarity was further defined by Vasconcelos as a lack of vital experience, as well as of reading and meditating. That is, the lack of a proper literary technique – style – was not related to a process of acquisition and development, but to missing content.<sup>97</sup> Given the proper content-experience, the problem of literary form would naturally disappear: “Pues mi concepto resultaba de tal magnitud que al desenvolverse crearía un estilo, construiría su propia arquitectura.”<sup>98</sup> Accordingly, one could learn to dominate techniques of literary expression without them granting any value to a piece of literary writing. True literary and artistic expression could happen only beyond literary technique,

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<sup>96</sup> Vasconcelos, 233.

<sup>97</sup> In his own memoirs, poet and pedagogue Jaime Torres Bodet (1902-1974) was more acute in discerning the material conditions of literary expression as the transmission of literary technique. Writing about the public curriculum put in place by Nemesio García Naranjo during Victoriano Huerta’s brief presidency, he is explicit about the absence of a practical dimension in the teaching of literature, a lack of praxis which is also a lack of theory: “¿De qué modo se hace un poema?...Esta pregunta me atormentaba. Pese a las innovaciones del Plan García Naranjo, el sistema positivista nos había hecho llegar al estudio de la literatura española del Siglo de Oro sin indicarnos antes, siquiera, qué diferencia hay entre la alegoría y el símbolo, la jaculatoria y el ditirambo, la égloga y la elegía. Educados en provincia, algunos de mis compañeros habían podido asomarse a la *Retórica* de Campillo [...] Satisfecho con vigilar nuestra ortografía y con señalarlos en qué frases estaban mal empleados nuestros gerundios, mi profesor de español no nos había revelado cómo se mide un alejandrino, ni de cuántos renglones consta un soneto. Semejante ignorancia dificultó mis ensayos sensiblemente.” See *Tiempo de Arena* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1955). Torres Bodet worked with Vasconcelos during his tenure as Minister of Education and was Minister of Education himself from 1944 to 1946, and then again from 1958 to 1964.

<sup>98</sup> Vasconcelos, *Memorias I*, 270.



just as the spiritual aristocracy Vasconcelos dreamed of could only emerge beyond professionalization.<sup>99</sup>

Indeed, literary style was for Vasconcelos the product of professionalization within the sphere of high culture. He disdainfully defined his colleagues at the Ateneo as the predecessors of literary professionalism, a definition that is quite precise, the unjust disdain notwithstanding: “Muchos de ellos fueron avanzada de los que hoy desdeñan a Balzac por sus descuidos de forma y, en cambio, soportan necedades de Gide o de Proust, como que eternamente los profesionales del estilo ignoran el ritmo de relámpago de los mensajes que contienen espíritu.”<sup>100</sup> In this passage, the “professionals of style” are put in contrast with the “lightening-rhythm” of spirit. The manifestation of spirit is immediate, manly, authentic, so strong it shakes the world’s foundations; style is gratuitous, ornamental. The distinction is evidently related to sexual gender. It is no coincidence that Vasconcelos chose André Gide and Marcel Proust as representatives of the professionals of style. It is actually a wonder he did not mention Oscar Wilde. In turn, the distinction between spirit and style is reproduced at another level as the distinction between Being and culture. Discussing the Ateneo’s literary preferences, Vasconcelos mentions the works of Spanish philologist Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo before launching his narration into a hostile future:

Todos releíamos su *Historia de las ideas estéticas y los Heterodoxos* [*Historia de los Heterodoxos españoles*]. Aún no llegaba por América el contagio de los estudios detallistas

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<sup>99</sup> This concern with the relations between literary technique and literary value was shared by the young Alfonso Reyes. It is one of the main questions that drives Reyes’s first collection of essays, *Cuestiones estéticas*, published in 1911. See, for example, the essay “Sobre las *Rimas bizantinas* de Augusto de Armas,” in which the Cuban poet Augusto de Armas (1869-1893), who wrote his brief output completely in French, is studied as a case of perfect poetic technique that, however, does not lead to great poetry. For Reyes, it was not the fact that de Armas chose French over Spanish that could explain this, but the fact that de Armas attached himself completely to a single poetic school, the French Parnassians. Thus, he became for Reyes the model of a *school poet* and represented the dangers of technique mechanically transmitted and practiced. See *Obras completas de Alfonso Reyes, I* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1955).

<sup>100</sup> Vasconcelos, *Memorias I*, 271.

y formales, gongorismos y prosas de filólogos que tropiezan con la sintaxis. Manejábamos ideas preocupándonos de la esencia del pensamiento, más que de la moda de su atavío. Nos preocupaba el ser, no la <<Cultura>>. No nacía aún o no nos llegaba esta nueva religión de la ciencia que en aquel instante superábamos.<sup>101</sup>

This future nightmare made of philologists and Luis de Góngora specialists is, of course, the present from which Vasconcelos writes in the 1930's. In Buenos Aires, Amado Alonso and Raimundo Lida had recently translated and published a critical edition of essays by German philologists Karl Vossler (1872-1949), Leo Spitzer (1887-1960) and Helmut Hatzfeld (1892-1979). The title: *Introducción a la estilística romance* (1932). The professional language of *stylistics*, which dominated academic criticism in both Europe and the Americas during the 30's and 40's, was characterized by its marriage between radical empiricism and radical idealism - its aim was to leap from the accumulation of philological detail to the formulation of abstract, ideal concepts, such as "spirit" or "national people." And we should not forget that, a few years before *that*, in 1927, Alfonso Reyes had published *Cuestiones gongorinas* as part of the effort by young Spanish poets and philologists (including Dámaso Alonso, Pedro Salinas and Jorge Guillén) to reevaluate the works of the early modern Spanish poet.

Vasconcelos's interest in Being as opposed to Culture is indicative of a particular relation to cultural capital: "Mis colegas leían, citaban, cotejaban por el solo amor del saber; yo egoístamente atisbaba en cada conocimiento, en cada información, el material útil para organizar un concepto del ser en su totalidad. Usando de una expresión botánica muy en boga en nuestro medio, tomaba de la cultura únicamente lo que podía contribuir a la *eclosión* de mi personalidad."<sup>102</sup> The "blossoming" of Vasconcelos's personality stands in opposition to any professional use that might be made of high culture, such as quoting or comparing. Erudition is

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<sup>101</sup> Vasconcelos, 269.

<sup>102</sup> Vasconcelos, 269.

the accumulation of dead letter; only that which contributes to the development of individual personality is valuable. Cultural capital does not mainly reproduce itself through scholarly work but is enacted and continued through the civilized body of the gentleman. Studying the situation of French literature students in the 1960's, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron found that students who belonged to high classes were most likely to establish this sort of personal relation to cultural capital, while students from the middle and lower classes would tend to be content with a purely professional relationship.<sup>103</sup> Fifty years earlier, across the Atlantic, the Ateneo provided a different picture: José Vasconcelos, middle-class son of an official bureaucrat, sought to establish a spiritual aristocracy based on the redemptive qualities of high culture, while Alfonso Reyes (son of Bernardo Reyes, possible successor to Porfirio Díaz) and Pedro Henríquez Ureña (son of Salomé Ureña and Francisco Henríquez y Carvajal, prominent Dominican intellectuals) sought to professionalize high culture and reproduce it as a set of techniques in a house of higher studies. A different strategy for the production of cultural prestige, one that was certainly not incommensurable with his own, was interpreted by Vasconcelos as a surrender. The professionalization of high culture achieved by Henríquez Ureña and Reyes made them in Vasconcelos eye's part of the mutilated world of professional work: "A excepción de Antonio Caso, a quien siempre admiré, los demás del Ateneo me parecían incompletos, con su preocupación de la forma y su falta de garra para pensar y aun para vivir." For Vasconcelos, literary form necessarily evinced a lack of vital and intellectual energies, since such energies were actually beyond domestication by literary form.

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<sup>103</sup> See *Les Héritiers: les étudiants et la culture* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1964); translation into English by Richard Nice, *The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relation to Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

Of course, going beyond literary form only meant finding a new one. Vasconcelos imagined this transition (and it may be that such a transition can ever only be imagined, never actualized) as the substitution of the *adjectival* with the *substantive*, a literature focused on the essence of the noun rather than on its accidents: “Un arte de sustancias en lugar de artificios y maneras. Una literatura de sustantivos en vez del adjetivismo dannunziano, entonces en boga.”<sup>104</sup> At the level of speculation, the gist of the contradiction lay between the immediate, lightning-like manifestation of spirit and language’s inevitable bondage to succession and time. How could that which was outside of succession be expressed? For a time, Vasconcelos entertained a pre-Borges cabalistic fantasy about a language that consisted of a single word: “Durante mucho tiempo me preocupó la tesis cabalística hebrea que resume en un vocablo sagrado toda la sabiduría. Eso era necesario volver a encontrar: el signo mágico, único y total que hiciera inútil todo el ensayo pluralista de las aproximaciones.”<sup>105</sup> To do away with time meant, of course, to do away with life - everything that is accidental, contingent, adjectival. During the Ateneo’s literary discussions, he was antipathetical towards the 19<sup>th</sup>-century French novel: “Inmergida en el Cosmos, la mente no me dejaba ideaciones salidas de la cabeza de un personaje de barba o sin barba, sino chispazos y resplandores como los del tubo de Roentgen que había visto funcionar en la clase de Física.” In a sense, this new literary form was the paradoxical expression of a will to leave all form behind. As such, it was also an impossible effort, or rather an effort that could infinitely approach its target, but never fully attain it – a *substantive* excess always remained outside of written language, which was incapable of detaching itself completely from the *adjectival*. Vasconcelos was condemned to this bad infinity by his own presuppositions, and mainly by his refusal to consider writing as the

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<sup>104</sup> Vasconcelos, 304.

<sup>105</sup> Vasconcelos, 304.

product of a set of strategies and techniques which could be transmitted and cultivated.<sup>106</sup> Conceived as the immediate expression of desire, written expression is bound to express its own failure. It is in this sense that sexual and literary frustration refer to each other in *Ulises Criollo*.

And yet, Vasconcelos was also aware that his “incapacity and indifference towards form” could not be completely attributed to his personal character or to a purely philosophical disagreement. Rather, it was decisively related to his personal history: “...lo mismo me hubiera dado que la obra estuviese escrita en prosa, o haberla leído en alguna traducción castellana. Sin duda, una predisposición temperamental, y también el hábito de traducir desde la infancia, me ha dejado esta indiferencia e incapacidad para la forma.”<sup>107</sup> As can be seen, Vasconcelos’s disdain for style and form is made intelligible in relation to the practice of translation. Translation determines Vasconcelos’s relations to “style” and “form” in so far as it presents a concrete (and for Vasconcelos antagonistic) model for the creation and dissemination of cultural prestige. It could be said that translation was the very essence of Vasconcelos’s aesthetics. This had two implications. First, it defined a particular strategy for the consumption of cultural capital, an aesthetic way of reading. Significantly, Vasconcelos’s first properly aesthetic experience happened during his Eagle Pass years. The book in question was an English translation of Homer’s *Iliad*, an important detail when we consider Vasconcelos’s narration of the Eagle Pass school as the epic battle-ground of student-heroes: “La he recordado siempre. Una de las más fuertes sacudidas espirituales de mi infancia: *La Iliada*, con notas y explicaciones al verso inglés. Me la prestaron.

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<sup>106</sup> Consider the following passage, found in Vasconcelos, in relation to the passage previously quoted from Torres Bodet: “Y por más que revisaba la preceptiva y por mucho que confiaba en cierta definición, creo que del Campillo: líneas iguales rimadas al fin... pero dentro <<hay que poner talento>>, y yo creía poner talento, las líneas no me salían iguales y la rima se me negaba, pese al *Diccionario Castellano* legado de mi padre. Tan pobres vi mis poemas que desistí para siempre de hacerlos, consolado con mi fama de metafísico y filósofo.” Vasconcelos, indeed, is one of the provincial students who consult Campillo’s *Retórica* in Torres Bodet narration.

<sup>107</sup> Vasconcelos, 60.

Esforzándome para traducirla, captaba, no obstante la maraña bilingüe, la acción maravillosa, el río de elocuencia del inmortal poeta.” This translation scene gives us a foundational image of the way Vasconcelos imagined cultural prestige was disseminated. The enactment is the translation itself. However, this translation does not merely imply the substitution of one national language for another. Rather, sense (“the river of eloquence”) emerges *in spite* of the “bilingual tangle.” In other words, Homer is immortal precisely because he expressed *something* that is not tied definitively to ancient Greek, or English or Spanish. This *something*, which of necessity implies a universal common ground, is the logical guarantee of translation, that is, of the possibility of effectively actualizing a work’s value (prestige) in any particular language. For Vasconcelos, reading as translating did not imply only a horizontal switch between national languages, but more importantly a vertical translation from any particular code to the universal content of a work. Language (every language, including Spanish) was the ladder one threw away after reaching the higher ground of universality, as in Wittgenstein’s famous image.

This aesthetic relation to a work of literature, which involved the translation of its linguistic particularities into its universal content, is analogous to Vasconcelos’s formulation of reading as the “blossoming” of the self. The “universal content” of a work is precisely the kind of nourishment necessary for the self to develop, for itself to become universal. The study of *means* could only interest philologists and academics. And, in fact, this aesthetic relation to works of literature is in a strong sense the complement and the critique of the relationship established by philology between a work of literature and its reader. For Vasconcelos, the aesthetic signified a relation between a work and the unspecialized subject, the amateur; philology, on the other hand,

demanded that one consider literary language a dead organism, fit for dissection and study.<sup>108</sup> The amateur and the specialist relate to the work of literature in different ways. In the first case, the subject is passive, it allows itself to be shaped by the work; in the second, the analytical subject takes precedence and the work is transformed into dead letter. For a work of literature to be transformed into dead letter meant that it became *simply* its language – a transitory phase in the history of styles and cultures. For Vasconcelos, this disinterested (academic) relation to high culture expressed a reactionary political attitude precisely in the fact that it presented itself as non-political. The assumption that one needed to be a specialist to understand the *Iliad* and, more than that, to be im-pressed and in-formed by it was the antithesis of his educational project for national regeneration through culture. For Vasconcelos, high culture was only so on the condition that it expressed something *beyond* the particularities of each particular knowledge or trade; as such, the fact that it was taken as the object of professional study seemed ludicrous, self-defeating. The “universal content” of the work erased both linguistic and professional particularities, made them irrelevant.

The second implication of considering the aesthetic dimension of a work of literature as a matter of translatability (not only as the switch from one code to another, but as the actualization of the work’s prestige as universally interesting) is a particular relation between language and self for the production of cultural capital. Because from very early on he felt the seduction of works of literature both in English and in Spanish, Vasconcelos deduced that the cause of this seductions must lie beyond either particular language. This feeling was reinforced when he was taught *just* enough French in school to be able to access the cultural capital stored in French literature. In this

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<sup>108</sup> Similar accusations were made by Nietzsche against the philologists of his age. See *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine’s Press, 2004). There is thus some irony in the fact that both philology and aesthetics were institutionalized as disciplines in late 19th century Spain by the same man, the Catalan Manuel Milà i Fontanals.

way, translation became for Vasconcelos not a posterior phase in a work's publication history - unrelated to the process of its production - but one of its principles of composition: "Y contemplando el éxito de los camaradas, que ya empezaban a publicar prosas selectas y bruñidas, yo ambicionaba un estilo suelto y conciso, capaz de resistir la traducción a todas las lenguas, valioso por su contenido original y definitivo."<sup>109</sup> It is in this particular sense that he was dismissive of "style" and "form" – because he doubted they could be translated, their prestige actualized in a different language, made interesting for an international audience, become universal. To pursue the exploitation of the stylistic particularities of each language seemed cultural suicide. Aesthetic value was to be found not in a particular "style" but in "universal content" – only this fact could explain the sustained interest the "classics" motivated throughout centuries. Thus, at the end of the more than two thousand pages that make up his memoirs, Vasconcelos narrates the moment in which he decided to write an adventure novel, then to realize that his own life contained more adventures than his imagination could ever hope to articulate.

The possible universality of Vasconcelos's memoirs – the chance that they might become a national and (through translation) international source of cultural prestige – was wagered by their author to the content of his own life. Actions needed no literary artifice to be aesthetic beyond their mere narration; on the contrary, narration was dependent on the aesthetic quality of actions themselves. In the prologue to the last volume of the memoirs, "El Proconsulado," Vasconcelos reflected on the experience of writing an autobiography:

*En el prólogo del tomo tercero de estas memorias [El desastre] dije con cierta irreflexiva arrogancia que toda vida completa es un crescendo de sinfonía, un tema de tono mayor en ascenso, desde la cuna hasta la muerte [...] No es ese mismo el estado de quien*

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<sup>109</sup> Vasconcelos, *Memorias I*, 211.



*penetra en la vejez [...] Una suerte de marcha fúnebre heroica [...] larga lamentación entrecortada de jubilosos arpegios.*<sup>110</sup>

In the preliminary words to the concluding volume of his memoirs, Vasconcelos attributed all aesthetic value to the content of his life, although the memoirs never make it clear whether he was the author, an interpreter or a mere spectator of his life's events. The analogy between personal destiny and musical composition implies a narrative in which *action* and *expression* are the same thing. Thus, literary language played no role in the wager other than efficiently narrating life's aesthetic content. It is hard to decide, and perhaps also beyond academic decorum, whether Vasconcelos won this wager or lost it. That his life had national interest was proved by the fact that his memoirs were practically bestsellers when published. And yet, it is up for debate whether Vasconcelos's writings, with the memoirs at their front, became part of the Mexican literary canon as did the works of Alfonso Reyes. It is beyond a doubt they did not elicit the international interest Vasconcelos expected from their "universal content."<sup>111</sup>

Let us conclude, then, that in his memoirs José Vasconcelos enacted a particular strategy for the creation and dissemination of cultural prestige based on the notion of an aesthetic life. This strategy conceived cultural prestige (national and international) as emerging from a process in which the self was made "universal" by developing all of its potentialities. This self was developed *out of* but also *in contrast to* the process of education in the school and the conditions of labor and professional life. In this sense, the self was analogous to great works of art which, in the particular case of literature, managed to escape the limitations of particular linguistic expressions through a universally interesting content. In Vasconcelos's case, this strategy demanded that language work as the immediate expression of the subject. For what could be more contradictory than an aesthetic

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<sup>110</sup> José Vasconcelos, *Memorias II*, 601. Italics in the original.

<sup>111</sup> The relationship between translation and universality remained a theoretical problem, however, which received much attention in the essays and translations of Octavio Paz during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

life without a spectator? Of necessity, the particular kind of *value* granted to such a life depended on the recognition of another subject like itself. Thus, it is not enough that one lives aesthetically, but one must try in so far as possible to make such an existence *visible*. The first consequence of understanding life aesthetically is the implication of a new horizon of vision derived from the consciousness of *being looked at* - a subjectivity that knows itself to be also and at the same time the object of contemplation of an alien gaze.

Behind Vasconcelos's cultural politics, of which the memoirs are an essential part, one can always fathom the distressing consciousness of that strange and foreign gaze. Consider the reason he offers for his distaste of reading poems out loud: "Con todo, prefería leer los versos ya ingleses, ya españoles, pues me exasperaba el sonsonete del recitado. Cierta convencionalismo de la declamación de cada lengua revela su ridiculez cuando lo escucha un extranjero que no está viciado por el hábito."<sup>112</sup> The foreigner this passage (a foreign ear if not an eye) refers to is, of course, Vasconcelos himself, equally distanced from English and Spanish, an alien to them both and thus in a particular position to take them as objects of criticism. Even in this trivial moment, the gaze of the other is present and actively shapes the subject's relation to written and oral expression. Thus, the subjectivity that aesthetically constructs itself *in relation* to the aesthetic recognition of another in turn comprehends itself as the activity of translation, as *that which translates*. Conversely, that which is translated is necessarily assumed to represent the ontological, universal ground which makes translation possible, both as the horizontal switch from one code to another and as the vertical leap from a particular linguistic code to a "universal content." It was at the level of this "universal content" that aesthetic recognition from the "other" could happen, with the production of cultural prestige as its result. The alien gaze that contemplates aesthetic life is thus

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<sup>112</sup> Vasconcelos, *Memorias I*, 60.

constitutive of Vasconcelos's consciousness of his own self and, more importantly, of the means of its narration. This "other" could certainly be defined in geopolitical terms: the United States, England, really any of Vasconcelos's cultural enemies. But it could also be given a temporal dimension: the "other" are the future generations Vasconcelos makes an explicit presence in the text when he declares that he writes for those born fifty years after the publication of the memoirs. It may be that in the experience of modernity as all that is solid melting into air, posterity is the inevitable "other" from which culture expects its continual recognition.

CHAPTER IV. THE OBJECT AND ITS SHADOW: SCIENCE, POETRY AND EROS IN THE  
CRITICAL WORK OF JORGE CUESTA

*I. The Power that Creates through Division: Specialization and the Cultural Avant-Garde.*

Like in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, during the 1920's and 30's Mexico underwent a vertiginous process of government-led modernization. After ten years of civil strife, the various revolutionary factions had at least reached one conclusion, albeit in a negative form: the nation could no longer afford a state of continual warfare. If, during Porfirian times, "peace" became the rallying emblem around which political forces gathered, now a new watchword emerged: construction.<sup>1</sup> When he became president in 1920, general Álvaro Obregón declared the Revolution's "destructive" phase over, and the beginning of a new "constructive" era. Indeed, the following two decades brought about a radical transformation on all fronts, from the reinsertion of Mexican economy into the international market, fiscal and educational reforms, to paving of streets, expansion of electric and telephone networks, construction of highways and public transportation. The term "construction" (and a decade later, "development") embodied Mexico's longing for modernity.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the meanings and workings of "peace" in Porfirian Mexico, see Mauricio Tenorio, *La Paz 1876* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> For a brief and friendly account of Obregón and Calles' economic policy, see Enrique Krauze, *El nacimiento de las instituciones* (Mexico City: Tusquets, 2015). For a more specialized account, see Eduardo Turrent, "México. La política económica: pensamiento, acciones y resultados, 1920-1931," in *Fundamentos de la política económica en México. 1910-2010*, ed. María Eugenia Romero Sotelo (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2012). For accounts of Mexican "development", see Francisco Suárez Dávila, "Retórica, política económica y resultados del desarrollismo mexicano: 1932-1958," also in *Fundamentos de la política económica en México*, and Enrique Cárdenas, "La política económica en la época de Cárdenas," in *Perspectivas sobre el cardenismo: ensayos sobre economía, trabajo, política y cultura en los años treinta*, ed. Marcos Tonatiuh and Alberto Enriquez Perea (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 1996). For a *longue-durée* approach, see Aurora Gómez Galvarriato, "Modernización económica y cambio institucional: del porfiriato a la segunda guerra mundial," in *Claves de la historia económica de México: el desempeño de largo plazo (siglos XVI-XXI)*, ed. Graciela Márquez (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2014).

The arts, of course, were not immune to the allure of modernization. In painting, the *muralistas*' praised modernization and their promise of utopia: automobiles, trains, telephone lines, construction machines, industrial plants and industrial workers all invaded a symbolic space previously occupied by the rural landscape and the effigies of national heroes. In music, Silvestre Revueltas and Carlos Chávez introduced "violent dissonance, abrupt rhythm changes and irregular accentuation," expressing the bombastic energies of a self-transforming revolutionary nation. And, in poetry, the *estridentista*'s avant-garde unashamedly sung the chaos of the modern polis. Manuel Maples Arce's *Urbe* (1924), actually reads as a poetic inventory of the new city: "Oh ciudad toda tensa / de cables y de esfuerzos, / sonora toda / de motores y de alas / [...] Escoltas de tranvías / que recorren las calles subversistas [*sic*] / Los escaparates asaltan las aceras, / y el sol, saquea las avenidas." For all of these artists, "construction" meant a return to the epic: a new, virile art of labor, struggle and triumph. Maples Arce again: "Los muelles. Las dársenas. / Las grúas. / Y la fiebre sexual / de las fábricas."<sup>3</sup>

And yet, as Marshall Berman argued, the creative impulses of modernity are better characterized as tragic rather than epic: every modern achievement involves an act of self-

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<sup>3</sup> For the muralists relation to industrial modernity see the introduction to Rubén Gallo, *Mexican Modernity: The Avant-Garde and the Technological Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005). For a more complex account and thorough account of the muralist's relation to mechanization and the new industrial forms, see Sergio Delgado Moya's "Attention and Distraction: The Billboard as Mural Form," in *Delirious Consumption: Aesthetics and Consumer Capitalism in Mexico and Brazil* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2017). See also Robin Adèle Greeley's "Nietzsche contra Marx in Mexico: The *Contemporáneos*, Muralism, and Debates over 'Revolutionary' Art in 1930's Mexico" and Jennifer A. Jolly's "Siqueiros' Communist Proposition for Mexican Muralism: A Mural for the Mexican Electricians' Syndicate," both in *Mexican Muralism: A Critical History*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Leonard Folgarait, Robin Adele Greeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). For the avant-garde music of Carlos Chávez and Silvestre Revueltas, see Dan Malmstrom, *Introducción a la música mexicana del Siglo XX* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1977). For recent account of the *estridentista* movement, see Elissa J. Rashkin, *The Stridentist Movement in Mexico: The Avant-Garde and Cultural Change in the 1920's* (Lenham: Lexington Books, 2009), which contains a chapter on the relation between stridentistas and muralistas; and Lynda Klich, *The Noisemakers: Estridentism, Vanguardism and Social Action in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (California: University of California Press, 2018).

destruction, and this absolute contradiction lies at the heart of being modern.<sup>4</sup> For a modern utopia to exist, all that is solid must first melt into air. 1920s Mexico was no exception. Again, like in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, the triumphalist epic of modernization was mirrored by its dark counterpart: the tragedy of specialization. But now, the problem was of course that the division between liberal professions and technical competencies was deeper than ever –both intellectual and technical labor had become extremely specialized. In a lecture addressed to the academic community of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, psychology professor Miguel Ángel Cevallos characterized thus the situation:

No todos podrán cumplir indiferentemente todas las tareas que exige la subsistencia del cuerpo social; son tantas y tan diversas que asombra la división a que ha llegado el trabajo en la sociedad contemporánea [...] De la clase sacerdotal se derivan todas las profesiones liberales: el matemático, el astrónomo, el medico, el magistrado, el filósofo, el abogado, etc.; de la clase guerrera vemos brotar la nobleza, diversidad infinita de ocupaciones que proporcionan la agricultura, el comercio y la industria.<sup>5</sup>

Not surprisingly, Cevallos quotes the grand philosopher of “synthesis,” Antonio Caso (who wrote the preface to Cevallos’ discourse): “Nuestro siglo – dice el Maestro Caso en su “Sociología Genética y Sistemática” – ha sustituido a todas las reglas morales un solo imperativo categórico: SABER HACER ALGO BIEN.”<sup>6</sup> And yet, this was no mere reinstatement of *arielismo*. Cevallos’ address not only aimed at compensating specialization through an “integral” education, but most

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<sup>4</sup> Berman writes of Goethe’s Faust: “...he won’t be able to create anything unless he’s prepared to let everything go, to accept the fact that everything that has been created up to now – and, indeed, all that he may create in the future must be destroyed to pave the way for more creation [...] it is the dialectic that will soon envelop and move the modern economy, state and society as a whole.” (48) A few pages back, he also relates this modern predicament to “the birth of a new social division of labor in the West, and with it new relationships – adventurous and, as we will see, tragic relationships – between thought and political and social life.” (43). Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Miguel Ángel Cevallos, *La Escuela Nacional Preparatoria: Ensayo crítico*, prol. Antonio Caso (Mexico City: Imprenta Mundial, 1933), 144-145. Cevallos’ critical essay was not only prefaced by Antonio Caso but was dedicated to Vicente Lombardo Toledano. Curiously, Caso and Toledano were that same year rivals in a polemic regarding undergraduate education at the National University. See Carlos Alberto Sánchez and Roberto Eli Sánchez, “The University Debate between Antonio Caso and Vicente Lombardo Toledano (1933),” in *Mexican Philosophy in the 20th Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Cevallos, 146.

importantly at the creation of an Instituto de Orientación Profesional, where children would be assigned a place in the division of labor according to their character, sensibility, intelligence, physical condition and aptitude for manual labor. If Rodó had placed Spanish America's destiny in the overcoming of specialization through culture, now Cevallos was emphatic: the happiness of individuals and the greatness of nations depended on the appropriate vocational.

It is significant that Cevallos did not include artistic production in any of his labor categories; artists were neither professionals, nor bureaucrats, nor material producers. Artistic production, we might surmise, is the only one immune to specialization. And, indeed, for all their boasting about breaking with the past, neither *muralistas* nor *estridentistas* abandoned the humanist-aesthetic function assigned to the production of art since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century (and, in the case of the *muralistas*, assigned by José Vasconcelos in the 1920's). The arts' goal remained to articulate, in art and through art, a coherent subject amid the modern fragmentation of knowledges and competencies. For Rubén Gallo, Diego Rivera had no use for industry in the production of his own art, despite his enthusiasm for industrial manufacture.<sup>8</sup> It seems that, if murals were to accomplish their pedagogic function as producers of subjects, art itself could not be subjected to the industrial processes which constituted the content of Rivera's paintings. This contradiction can be extended to *estridentista* poetry. Beyond some superficial attempts at modernizing poetic technique, the lyrical subject remained a totalizing presence as strong as in any romantic poem. Consider the poetic theme in the first canto of Maples Arce's *Urbe*, around which all variations develop: "He aquí mi poema." As the lyrical subject wanders the "city taut by wires and effort," it gathers the fragments of urban reality and weaves them into a whole: *his* poem.

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<sup>8</sup> Gallo, *Mexican Modernity*, 11. See also Sergio Delgado's "Attention and Distraction: The Billboard as Mural Form," in *Delirious Consumption: Aesthetics and Consumer Capitalism in Mexico and Brazil* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2017).

Neither Rivera nor Maples Arce ever abandoned the 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideal of art as “synthesis,” the symbolic (subjective) reconciliation of everything modern times had torn apart.

In Mexican literary history, it was the intellectual group known as *Contemporáneos* who registered the pressure of specialization in the realm of artistic production: Xavier Villaurrutia, José Gorostiza, Jaime Torres Bodet, Salvador Novo, Bernardo Ortíz de Montellano, Jorge Cuesta and Gilberto Owen.<sup>9</sup> In “El joven,” an urban chronicle written in 1928, Salvador Novo salutes “la fuerza que crea dividiendo en nuestra moderna sociedad”: “¡Cosa admirable, por inconsciente, esta especialización de labores! Ella ayuda a la substitución inevitable de unos tipos por otros, y contrarresta un poco, en la tierra de don Juan de Dios Peza, los propósitos de José Vasconcelos.” “El joven” is a feisty enumeration of the multifarious forms of human activity found in the streets of Mexico City and the modern characters it produced: car mechanics, journalists, construction works, bus drivers, ophthalmologists, proctologists (“otros aún, cuyo posterior examen a sus clientes no debe de ser muy divertido”) and dentists, law students, pharmacists, *literatos* and *literatas*, shoemakers, medicine students: “Para cada actividad señalada, remedios o gentes especiales.” Novo’s hopes are clear: in the land of such awful poets as Juan de Dios Peza (“Yo tengo en el hogar un soberano / único a quien venera el alma mía; / es su corona su cabello cano, / la honra su ley y la virtud su guía”), “la fuerza que crea dividiendo” would produce a new type of poet, even against José Vasconcelos’s and the Ministry of Education’s best efforts.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the

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<sup>9</sup> The standard account of the group’s activities is still Guillermo Sherdian’s *Los Contemporáneos Ayer* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985). The shifting definitions of who was, or was not, actually part of *Contemporáneos* are discussed in Luis Mario Schneider’s “Los Contemporáneos: la vanguardia desmentida,” in *Los Contemporáneos en el laberinto de la crítica*, ed. Rafael Olea Franco and Anthony Stanton (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1994). See also Christopher Domínguez Michael, “Contemporáneos, los enemigos de la promesa,” in *Tiros en el concierto* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1997). From an inside account, see Jaime Torres Bodet, *Contemporáneos* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1987), as well as Torres Bodet’s memoirs, *Tiempo de arena* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1955)

<sup>10</sup> Salvador Novo, “El joven”, in *Toda la prosa* (Mexico City: Empresas Editoriales, 1962), 538.



separation between the *Contemporáneos* and other avant-gardes in the 1920's and 1930's is the separation between, on the one hand, an art that takes modernity as an object of representation, but at the same time preserves its humanistic function, and, on the other, an art that becomes modern by subjecting itself to the process of specialized division described by Novo, “la fuerza que crea dividiendo.”<sup>11</sup>

Not all members of *Contemporáneos* – the “grupo sin grupo,” after all – reacted to the pressure of specialization with Novo's characteristic joyful irony – although they all answered to it. The most insightful examiner of the relations between the force that creates through division and the field of artistic production was Salvador Novo's fellow *Contemporáneo*, Jorge Cuesta. In the words of Luis Cardoza y Aragón, an extraordinary observer of Mexican life in the 1930's, Cuesta “es considerado como la inteligencia crítica más aguda y trascendente de ese discutido ‘grupo sin grupo’.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Cuesta was not only the *Contemporáneos*' apologist, but the only true self-reflective thinker of their practice. In this chapter, I will argue that, for Cuesta, the specialization of poetry and the arts involved the conscious relinquishment of the pedagogic function of producing synthetic subjects –i.e., their “patriarchal magistry,” to borrow Adolfo Castañón's felicitous formulation.<sup>13</sup> For Cuesta, specialization in art implied a sacrificial self-denial by which art rejected its humanistic function, its powers for symbolic reproduction through

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<sup>11</sup> There is nothing surprising about the continuities between the late 19th-century humanism of Reyes's generation and the socialist cultures of the 1930's: Vicente Lombardo Toledano's “El sentido humanista de la Revolución mexicana,” publicly read and then published by the CROM (*Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana*), is the best description of the pedagogic alliance between humanism and socialism that aimed to “realizar la sustancia espiritual del hombre.”

<sup>12</sup> Luis Cardoza y Aragón, *Apolo y Coatlicue: ensayos mexicanos de espina y flor* (Mexico City: La Serpiente emplumada, 1944), 145.

<sup>13</sup> “La magistratura patriarcal de la literatura como magisterio [sic], el ejercicio de las letras como una extensión de las armas ciudadanas y nacionalistas, poco y mal se podía compadecer con la propuesta ascética y resueltamente personal de una vocación que, para sobrevivir como tal, debía sobrevivir en sus propios términos.” See “La desaparición de los ensayistas,” in *Los Contemporáneos en el laberinto de la crítica* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1994)

interpellation. This sacrificial act meant, essentially, the destruction of subjectivity as the ground of artistic production and consumption. Orphaned of the “spirit” that originated it, and unwilling to be devoured by the reader or the spectator, the work of art gained the freedom to become an individual *object*. Thus, specialization and criticism were for Cuesta one and the same thing; in his own words, the negative act of “arrancar cada objeto de su sombra y no dejarle sino la vida individual que posee.”

Today, Cuesta is best known for his participation in the famous 1932 literary controversy, where he defended the *Contemporáneos* against nationalist accusations of cosmopolitanism, effeminacy and frivolity. In the first section of this chapter, I will revisit the 1932 controversy, shifting the emphasis from the national vs cosmopolitan dichotomy to the polemic’s underlying tension between literature as a “general” or as a specialized praxis. As we shall see, Cuesta conceived a specialized art as one producing a kind of obstruction or blockade between the subject’s physical senses and the subject’s “spirit.” In the second section, I will explore the relations established by Cuesta between poetry and experimental science. The experimental sciences offered Cuesta (a chemist by profession) a working model for modern poetry, in so far as the foundations of sciences depended on the conception of their analytical object: a fragment of reality artificially detached from the totality of human “experience.” Specialization meant the rejection of art as the expression of “life,” such as Alfonso Reyes and José Vasconcelos had preached and practiced. In the third section, I will trace Cuesta’s history of modern Mexican poetry. If, as Christopher Domínguez Michael has stated, “Jorge Cuesta es el fundador del canon en la literatura mexicana,” it must be noted that the logic of this canon is the logic of specialization; that is, Cuesta’s history of modern Mexican poetry tells the story of a “rigor” and a “discipline” which detach the poetic

object from any form of subjectivity.<sup>14</sup> Finally, I will briefly analyze the *Contemporáneos*' longing for specialization and their actual professional situations as obscure, middle-ranged bureaucrats. In other words, I will conclude by considering poetic specialization as a truncated endeavor that engenders the longing for a literary market: a space where poetic praxis could become not only a specialization but a *profession*, where work and play would be but the same praxis.

## *II. The Art of Surfaces: Revisiting the 1932 Polemic.*

El ojo que ves no es  
ojo porque tú lo veas;  
es ojo porque te ve.  
Antonio Machado, *Proverbios y cantares*

It is a commonplace amongst scholars and literary critics that 1932 was a crucial year in the development of modern Mexican literature. The story is well known. On March 1932, Alejandro Núñez Alonso published in *El Universal Ilustrado*, a survey entitled “Una encuesta sensacional: ¿está en crisis la generación de vanguardia?” He included the responses by a handful of renowned intellectuals: journalist Guillermo Jiménez, poets Xavier Villaurrutia, José Gorostiza, Salvador Novo and Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano, novelist Ermilo Abreu Gómez and philosopher Samuel Ramos (bibliographer and editor Felipe Teixidor and scholar Francisco Monterde were invited to participate, but refused, prompting Núñez Alonso to state that *el que calla otorga*). Commotion was indeed the result of the survey. For the rest of the year, in newspaper articles and private letters, public conferences and even poems, Mexican intellectuals could not talk about anything

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<sup>14</sup> Domínguez Michael, “Jorge Cuesta y la crítica del demonio,” in *Tiros en el concierto* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1997), 283.

else – they wrangled over the perceived crisis with equal measures of acumen and passion, conciliatory feeling and bad faith.<sup>15</sup>

Although it lasted for almost a year and its participants expanded to include more than thirty names, Mexican literary history has preserved the memory and meaning of the debate in the form of a metonymy. On one side, Ermilo Abreu Gómez, who championed literary nationalism (the landscape, history, language and feelings of the nation as the natural object of artistic representation) against the artificiality, effeminacy and cosmopolitan *descastamiento* of the avantgarde. On the other, Jorge Cuesta, a young member of *Contemporáneos* – the “grupo sin grupo” to which Villaurrutia, Gorostiza, Novo and Ortiz de Montellano also belonged without belonging – who defended a “disinterested” poetic praxis, both autonomous and in tune with cosmopolitan trends. Nationalism vs Cosmopolitanism – such was for Mexican criticism the fight of the century. Today, there is no doubt about the winner: Cuesta’s rejection of literary nationalism would grant him, posthumously, the place of Mexico’s “first modern literary critic.”<sup>16</sup>

The dichotomy between nationalism and cosmopolitanism was, however, crucially informed by a less visible question, namely, that of literary specialization.<sup>17</sup> In his classic study of

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<sup>15</sup> The entire polemic is collected in Guillermo Sheridan, *México en 1932: La polémica nacionalista* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999). Sheridan also wrote an introductory piece on the subject, which offers the general panorama of the debate. In the quotes that follow, I will both give their reference in Sheridan’s collection and their original date and place of publication. In “México, Alfonso Reyes y Los Contemporáneos,” Miguel Capistrán explores a small part of the debate, an exchange of letters between Xavier Villaurrutia, Alfonso Reyes, and Héctor Pérez Martínez. See also Ignacio Sánchez Prado’s reading of the polemic in *Naciones Intelectuales* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2009). He argues that “Cuesta no ingresa al debate con una versión más del contenido del significante dado de lo nacional, sino con un cuestionamiento a la idea misma de nación.” Also Christopher Domínguez Michael, “El demonio de la crítica,” in *Tiros en el concierto* (Mexico City: Era, 1997); and “Segunda constelación: cultura mexicana y nacionalismo,” in Marta Stoop’s introduction to *Jorge Cuesta: Ensayos críticos* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1991)

<sup>16</sup> Playing with the meaning of *princeps*, Christopher Domínguez Michael calls Cuesta “el príncipe de nuestros críticos:” both the first and the highest.

<sup>17</sup> It must be noted that, out of the nine questions which made up the original questionnaire published in *El Universal*, only one of them refers to a tension between nationalism and cosmopolitanism: “La literatura en México ¿debe seguir un ritmo universal, mejor dicho europeo, o por el contrario debe ir hace el ultimo eslabón de la tradición literaria Mexicana?” But at least three of the questions express an anxiety about the *Contemporáneos* poetic sterility: “Se

the 1932 debate, Guillermo Sheridan traced the continuities between Abreu Gómez's position and the arguments espoused by Carlos Gutiérrez Cruz in 1925. The more obvious point made by Gutiérrez Cruz was a distinction between "strong" and "effeminate" literature.<sup>18</sup> Yet this distinction depended on the question of *accessibility*:

Mientras los anacrónicos proclaman la cultura como único medio para producir un arte fuerte, los revolucionarios gritamos que el arte hijo de la cultura es falso; *que toda obra de arte que requiera conocimientos especiales para ser comprendida es obra de artificio*; ellos buscan la belleza en el arte, nosotros buscamos el sentimiento.<sup>19</sup>

The "artificiality" of "effeminate" literature was not the result of its cosmopolitanism or frivolity, but of the fact that it required previous, specialized knowledge to be comprehended. In 1932, Abreu Gómez not only reiterated Gutiérrez Cruz distinction between the "virile" and the "effeminate," but also his critique of specialization: "effeminacy" is the result of "una literatura de laboratorio" and "una literatura de origen universitario." Sheridan nicely, if briefly, summarizes the amalgamation of cosmopolitanism and specialization in Abreu Gómez arguments: "...los cosmopolitas resultan una prolongación de una *especialización* que, laboratoril [sic], universitaria, técnica, mimética, es menester 'denunciar.'"<sup>20</sup>

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consideran ustedes culpables de la desorientación literaria que existe entre los jóvenes más jóvenes que ustedes?"; "La generación actual ¿responde unánimemente al movimiento literario de ustedes? Y si no es totalmente, ¿en qué volumen?"; "Y, así mismo, ¿cómo en cuatro años de existencia de *Contemporáneos*, esta revista no logro formar verdadero núcleo, una verdadera falange de escritores homogéneos e idóneos en una actitud?" Like a collective Socrates, the *Contemporáneos* are accused of misleading youth and offered the hemlock of nationalism to expiate their offense towards the polis.

<sup>18</sup> The standard reference to the 1925 polemic, around the subject of "effeminate" literature, is Victor Díaz Arciniega, *Querella por la cultura revolucionaria* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989) See also Robert McKee Irwin's reading of the polemic in "Virile Literature and Effeminate Literature: The 1920s and 1930s," in *Mexican Masculinities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). In "Vanguardia y campo literario: La Revolución Mexicana como apertura estética," Ignacio Sánchez Prado argues that "al usar términos como 'viril' y 'afeminado', los nacionalistas buscaban deslegitimar las posturas de sus adversarios no por el debate de ideas, sino por el ataque personal." In other words, that they were mere insults which conceal the real issue at hand: nationalism vs cosmopolitanism.

<sup>19</sup> Díaz Arciniega, *Querella*, 87. Italics mine.

<sup>20</sup> Sheridan, *México en 1932*, 89. Italics in the original.

The relation between specialization and effeminacy was thus mediated by the question of *accessibility* and thus to literature's "patriarchal magistry:" its generative powers to symbolically produce subjects. These elements had a prominent presence in the 1932 polemic. In an article from April 31<sup>st</sup>, Jesús S. Soto defined the crisis of the avant-garde as "una crisis de literatos" who were incapable of "[herir] hondamente la sensibilidad de los mexicanos." The *Contemporáneos'* original sin was: "Su anhelo ha sido aproximarse al mejor tipo de profesional 'hombre de letras', en un ambiente en que su labor carecería de sentido desde antes de iniciarse."<sup>21</sup> A month later, Hernán Rosales quoted prominent *arielista* Manuel Ugarte and defined the avant-garde as "literatura de farmacia," impotent to "penetrar en la conciencia de nadie." The *Contemporáneos* had failed to realize that "[t]oda época tiene su literatura, como cada literatura tiene su enseñanza..."<sup>22</sup> In a piece from May 17<sup>th</sup>, Héctor Pérez Martínez attacked Xavier Villaurrutia's "scientific" poetry and Jorge Cuesta's critique of "naturalness" and "sincerity."<sup>23</sup> A few days later, an anonymous article published in *El Universal* disqualified the *Contemporáneos* on the basis that "ha sido siempre achaque de literatos cierta femenil inclinación a las habladurías y las histéricas rivalidades profesionales."<sup>24</sup> And, to get to the polemic's most famous moment, on May 29, 1932, Abreu Gómez published "Literatura sin sexo," where he accused *Contemporáneos* for attempting to separate "la letra" from "el espíritu:" "Quiero decir ahora, no al joven Cuesta, sino a los que tras él acechan, que el espíritu de la letra debe surgir del espíritu del hombre." If Cuesta had proposed to "arrancar cada objeto de su sombra," Abreu Gómez wrote of reestablishing the "concordia espiritual entre el hombre y su sombra." And he was unequivocal about literature's obligation to

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<sup>21</sup> Sheridan, 191-192. Originally published in *Crisol, revista de crítica* IV, tomo VII, no. 39, 1932.

<sup>22</sup> Sheridan, 209-212. Originally published in *El Universal*, May 7<sup>th</sup>, p. 3-8.

<sup>23</sup> Sheridan, 222-223. Originally published in *El Nacional*, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Sheridan, 230-231. Originally published in *El Nacional*, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, p. 3. Sheridan, following Herón Pérez Martínez, ventures that the author could be Francisco Zamora.

produce “la conciencia orgánica de un pueblo:” “El pueblo aporta la materia: la literatura le imprime su dibujo. De la materia y del dibujo se deriva el valor del ejemplo. Y una literatura que no es ejemplo de bien y de belleza es literatura sin casta, literatura sin sexo.”<sup>25</sup> Literature had no sex precisely because it refused to be *exemplary*, because it refused the symbolic function of fatherhood.

Cuesta’s direct responses to Abreu Gómez have received ample critical attention and there is no need to reiterate them. Rather than focusing on Cuesta’s defense of Mexican cosmopolitanism, here I will argue that, against the nationalists’ demand to “penetrate consciousness,” Jorge Cuesta critically elaborated an art of “surfaces” –a word charged with meaning: art of first impressions, of first glances, of top things, of specific aesthetic forms vis-à-vis essential contents. I will pay particular attention to a series of three texts in which Cuesta developed his notions of a “superficial” art through the observation and enjoyment of Agustín Lazo’s paintings: “En la Exposición de Arte Moderno” (1926); “Agustín Lazo” (1927); and “La pintura superficial” (1932), a text read at an exposition of Lazo’s drawings as the nationalist polemic developed.<sup>26</sup> Through the notion of *surface*, Cuesta elaborates on a mode of artistic production and consumption which radically renounced its “patriarchal magistry.” Although these three texts refer to paintings, Cuesta’s *superficial* ideas are at the core of his critical imagination and can be found throughout his work, from his critique of Villaurutia’s and Gorostizas’s poetry to his appreciation of Higinio Ruvalcaba’s music.

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<sup>25</sup> Sheridan, 231-234. Originally published in *El Universal*, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Agustín Lazo (1896-1871) was closely to the *Contemporáneos* and Villaurutia’s life-long companion. Initially, Lazo was close to Adolfo Best Maugard, who was in charge of designing the manuals of “mexican” art used by José Vasconcelos’s Ministry. But Lazo later moved away from mexicanist themes and became closer to French surrealism and the metaphysical painting of Giorgio de Chirico. See Schneider’s “Los Contemporáneos: la vanguardia desmentida,” and Carlos Merida, “Agustín Lazo,” in *Modern Mexican Artists* (Mexico City: Frances Toor Studios, 1937).

“En la Exposición de Arte Moderno” is one of Cuesta’s earliest texts, written when he was twenty-three. It is a noteworthy text not only because it marks the beginning of Cuesta’s career as a cultural critic, but also because it registers the timid emergence of a cultural market in the 1920’s and its implications for national production and consumption of art: “Una exposición de pintura es un hecho tan inusitado, que cuando nos sorprende una invitación para asistir a una, imaginarias dificultades nos asaltan.”<sup>27</sup> There is not much information about the exposition; from Cuesta we learn that it was organized by Ernesto Cervantes, most likely the same Ernesto Cervantes Morales who later founded Casa Cervantes for the exposition (and sale) of “autochthonous” textiles and manufactures such as sarapes. We know also, again thanks to Cuesta, that the exposition gathered the works of most members of the visual avant-garde: Roberto Montenegro, Diego Rivera, Gabriel Fernández Ledesma, Doctor Atl, Fermín Revueltas, Jean Charlot, as well as photographers Tina Modotti and Edward Weston.

What is most striking about this text is that, for Cuesta, an art exposition is not an event where one goes to look at pictures – it is rather an event where one goes to be *looked at* by pictures. In the relation between the spectator and the work, the subject is not the agent, but the *patient*: the one who suffers the pictures’ gaze.<sup>28</sup> Wandering through the different rooms of the exposition, Cuesta is suddenly halted by two of Montenegro’s paintings: “Siendo la pintura nuestra curiosidad,

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<sup>27</sup> Jorge Cuesta, “En la Exposición de Arte Moderno,” in *Obras reunidas II. Ensayos y prosas varias*, ed. Jesús R. Martínez Malo and Víctor Peláez Cuesta (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004), 73. All references are to this edition.

<sup>28</sup> I take the notion of a “gaze” from Jacques Lacan, “The Split Between the Eye and the Gaze,” in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1988). For Lacan, psychoanalysis should distinguish between ‘the function of the eye’ and ‘the function of the gaze.’ A subject’s “eye” implied (Lacan takes his examples from Merleau-Ponty’s *Phénoménologie de la perception*) “the regulation of form, which is governed not only by the subject’s eye” but by its whole “constitutive presence, directed in what is called his total intentionality.” On the other hand, the “gaze” implies the recognition that “I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides.” In this sense, it is an experience that “circumscribes us, and which in the first instances makes us beings who are looked at.” What interests me here is precisely this last sentence, the instance that “makes us beings who are looked at,” or that turns us into something precisely by looking at us.



la convertimos en pasillo, pero somos detenidos por algo. Confundiéndonos con un comprador, grandes, solos, altos, sirviéndonos de marco toda la pieza, dos cuadros de Montenegro salen al paso...”<sup>29</sup> Montenegro’s paintings gaze at Cuesta, not the other way around. And, through their gaze, they in-form and bestow a particular role on the spectator: the subject is transformed, if only momentarily, into “un comprador de cuadros.” Cuesta has the same experience with Modotti’s and Weston’s photographs: “Enseñan a descubrir y, a cada instante, nos devuelven la justa mirada, al exacto punto de vista, si perdidos, dándonos en sus trabajos un manual del perfecto comprador de cuadros.”<sup>30</sup> Like Montenegro’s paintings, these images bestow a way of looking – “enseñan” and “devuelven la mirada justa” – that situates the subject in a particular social position. Cuesta’s irony is but a defense against a full identification with the pictures’ gaze, against the act of recognizing oneself in what the picture would pretend that we are: “Si interesado en comprar, el alto precio es todavía una sana advertencia para que la decisión se reflexione y se detenga. Pero su triunfo es evidente: lo compran con los ojos cerrados.”<sup>31</sup> The pictures “triumph” when the spectator “closes” his or her own eyes, which have been supplanted by the picture’s gaze, and assumes the role it was offered.

The magisterial function which interpellates the observer to recognize herself in the picture’s gaze is best exemplified by Cuesta’s engagement with Diego Rivera’s paintings, which shared a room at the exposition with Lazo’s works. Irony is there even before Cuesta finds himself under Rivera’s gaze: “...para mirar la pintura de Diego hay que crecer un poco y queda uno un poco siempre bajo todavía.” However, the obligation to “rise up” to Rivera’s paintings and the feeling of “always coming up a bit short” do not express the need for further preparation on part

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<sup>29</sup> Cuesta, “En la Exposición de Arte Moderno,” 73.

<sup>30</sup> Cuesta, “En la Exposición de Arte Moderno,” 74.

<sup>31</sup> Cuesta, “En la Exposición de Arte Moderno,” 74.

of the spectator in order to “understand” him. Rivera’s paintings are rather the very result of the painting’s paternal gaze, the very recognition they seek to produce: “Llegamos a él con los ojos que nos ha estado formando en los frescos y con la ambiciosa intención de aprender a abarcarlo – entiéndasenos, a recibir de él aquello que da –.” The eyes Rivera has been forming through his murals are the eyes ready to recognize him as their master, ready to accept that which *he* gives *them*. And yet, once in front of Rivera’s paintings, an unexpected phenomenon occurs: “Pero frente a sus cuadros recobramos libertad y la aprovechamos para robar – ésta es la palabra – delicias de color y de dibujo que reúne en la más sobre expresión.”<sup>32</sup> Rather than “taking” what Rivera “gives,” Cuesta recovers his “freedom” by “stealing delights of color and shape.” Stealing is indeed the appropriate word to describe the sensual pleasure obtained *against* Rivera’s insistence on “hacernos sentir su integridad y el deber escolar de recordarla.” Thus, if at one level the observer’s recognition of herself in the picture’s gaze implied taking on a particular social role (as in the case of Montenegro’s paintings and Weston’s and Modotti’s photographs), at another, deeper level, it implied the recognition of its master/father. For Cuesta, what Rivera’s paintings ultimately tried to produce was their own “patriarchal magistry,” which could, however, be escaped by stealing color and delight.

“En la Exposición de Arte Moderno” ends with a brief commentary on Lazo’s paintings. A year later, however, Cuesta published in *Ulises* an entire piece dedicated to Lazo’s work. From the beginning, the relation established between spectator and work through the paintings’ gaze is described in a different manner: “Pues la emoción corregida, el orden cultivado, la cuidadosa limpieza, el dibujo seguro de Agustín Lazo, no permiten a la mirada confusión perezosa. *No penetra en ella su pintura de golpe* [...] sino por partes discretamente medidas, como de un

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<sup>32</sup> Cuesta, “En la Exposición de Arte Moderno,”74.

discurso lógico y reposado.” While Montenegro’s paintings had *confused* Cuesta with a buyer, Lazo’s paintings do not allow such a confusion. The antonym of “confusion” in both these passages is not “understanding,” but “discretion” or “distinction:” the quality of remaining separate. To confuse means to blur the discreet limits between the spectator and the painting. In this sense, to avoid confusion it is also necessary to avoid understanding: “[Lazo] no hace concesiones a la facilidad de comprender; a la de mirar, sí.”<sup>33</sup> This movement from “sense” as a product of understanding to the pure, superficial enjoyment of the bodily senses, truly describes Cuesta’s *theft* of Rivera’s paintings: the rejection of the teacher’s “integrity” in favor of “delights of color and shape.”

Indeed, for Cuesta, modern art is but a form of sensuality: “La sensualidad es la cualidad característica de toda la pintura moderna; un pintor difiere de otro en su manera de ser sensual...”<sup>34</sup> In another 1927 article published in *Ulises*, Cuesta wrote that modern poetry “...parece que lo que pretende no es la posesión de la realidad, sino un nuevo modo de poseerla, y que ésta ha pasado a ser el instrumento en vez del objeto de la sensualidad. ¡Cómo si fuera una estratagema para engañarla y sorprenderla!”<sup>35</sup> In Lazo’s case, sensuality – its “mode” of possessing reality – is qualified by restraint: “...no es ni sedienta en extremo ni exaltada por ninguna otra razón; sabe encontrar su placer dentro de la más medida compostura...”<sup>36</sup> His gaze is superficial, it wishes neither to penetrate nor to possess: “No indagan sus ojos más allá de la superficie acariciable.”<sup>37</sup> And this form of sensuality, which stops at a caress, is reproduced in the spectator’s experience in the form of an *obstruction*: “La de Lazo es una pintura sin imágenes: sus masas inalterables, las

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<sup>33</sup> Cuesta, “Agustín Lazo,” 79.

<sup>34</sup> Cuesta, “Agustín Lazo,” 80.

<sup>35</sup> Cuesta, “Notas,” 91.

<sup>36</sup> Cuesta, “Agustín Lazo,” 80.

<sup>37</sup> Cuesta, “Agustín Lazo,” 81.

figuras quietas, los contornos indeformables, el color unido *no dejan pasar de la mirada al espíritu*, y aquélla se detiene en las superficies amplias y no recoge de ellas más significación posterior que la que ha dejado en su espacio visible una huella cuya permanencia la hace nuevo signo expresivo solo de sí mismo.”<sup>38</sup> Years later, Abreu Gómez would denounce the *Contemporáneos* for creating an abyss between “la letra” and “el espíritu.” His accusation was right on point. For Cuesta, what Lazo’s superficial sensuality entailed was precisely that: a blockade on the road that leads from the bodily senses to the spirit.

But Cuesta only thoroughly developed the notion of a superficial eros against the paternal-magisterial penetration of symbolic reproduction in “La pintura superficial,” which was read at the inauguration of one of Lazo’s drawing expositions in 1932, right at the beginning of the nationalist polemic. It is one of Cuesta’s most sophisticated texts, a playful, modern praise for the depth of superficiality. It begins with a sharp distinction between the ideal and the real:

Durante mucho tiempo fue concebida la belleza como un ideal universal; esto es, que no es exclusivo del artista, sino también servidumbre del crítico y del público. Cuán confusa se volvió la función de la crítica, el sentimiento del espectador, cuando la belleza fue a refugiarse en la realidad y ya no en un ideal [...] Gracias a este nuevo principio, no importa qué realidad puede aspirar a que el arte la obedezca. La realidad social, la realidad mexicana, la realidad de la naturaleza, la realidad moderna, la sobrerrealidad y cuántas otras, substituyen a la belleza clásica que se nos ha hecho inasible...<sup>39</sup>

To be sure, the relation between “ideality” and “classical beauty” was a commonplace all through the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. It was also an essential tenet of *arielismo* and of its Mexican pupils, the Ateneo de la Juventud - a tenet energetically rejected by avant-garde artists such as Maples Arce. For Cuesta, however, ideality meant neither a return to the forms of Classical Antiquity nor a rejection of modern, urban reality. The distinction between the ideal and the real was a distinction between

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<sup>38</sup> Cuesta, “Agustín Lazo,” 81.

<sup>39</sup> Cuesta, “La pintura superficial,” 144.

two forms of *desire*: “Ideal es lo que nunca se alcanza; así lo concibe la fatiga de desear un más allá constantemente remoto.” Thus, the ideal refers to an object of desire that is perpetually out of reach, and a form of desire that corresponds to this object by substituting its own satisfaction for “the fatigue of wanting a perpetual beyond.” The real, on the other hand, is what can be readily possessed, what offers no resistance to the subject’s desire. By possessing the real, however, desire spells out its own end – its satisfaction means its death: “Pero si el dominio de un dios se disminuye con su proximidad, lo sabe la pasión cuando se apodera del objeto que desea.”<sup>40</sup> The consequence of possession and satisfied desire is an endless repetition, where the object is continually substituted in order for desire to live (and die) again: “...no sufre nuestra inconstancia si hay otro objeto cuya novedad le restituya el deseo, si hay otro aspecto de la misma realidad que renueve nuestro sentimiento de ella. Es por esto por lo que el arte se ha convertido en abastecedor de realidades, como si la realidad nos hubiera faltado de repente. Es el arte lo que nos has faltado desde entonces.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, the distinction between the ideal and the real is the distinction between a form of desire which lives and dies through repetition and substitution, and a form of desire which does not seek release and lives only in the very act of desiring.

For Cuesta, “[l]a obra de arte es esencialmente una exigencia, no un regalo; aquella que da, se disipa.”<sup>42</sup> The superficial eros of art may indeed be defined in this succinct formula: *the work that gives itself, loses itself*. Lazo’s drawings “decepcionan nuestro asalto:” “Ningún misterio se transluce a través de su apariencia; no tiene una fuente invisible y subterránea lo que muestran; ningún temblor se agita debajo de su tranquilidad. Es la suya una pintura estrictamente superficial, y solo su superficie sigue apareciendo donde la rasgamos para averiguar lo que envuelve.”<sup>43</sup> In

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<sup>40</sup> Cuesta, “La pintura superficial,” 144.

<sup>41</sup> Cuesta, “La pintura superficial,” 144.

<sup>42</sup> Cuesta, “La pintura superficial,” 145.

<sup>43</sup> Cuesta, “La pintura superficial,” 145.

this sense, it is characterized by a kind of chastity: “Hay en ella hasta cierto temor de nuestra violencia [...] Podría decirse que se avergüenza de antemano del robo que sabe que le pretendemos hacer.”<sup>44</sup> In its chastity, it does not give itself to the endless substitution of the real: “...en lo que menos se apoya es en la realidad moderna, en la realidad mexicana, en la realidad social, en la sobrerrealidad, en todo esto que sabe que es de lo que más ansiosos estamos para suplantar nuestra propia realidad que ignora cómo disfrutarse, cómo sentirse.”<sup>45</sup> For this same reason, Lazo’s drawings refuse completion and culmination: “...no se definen sus dibujos, sino que mantienen su objeto como indeciso y como titubeante, para no dejar que hagamos nuestros y, por lo consiguiente, falsos, su carácter y su inclinación.”<sup>46</sup> Due to its chastity and superficiality, the work of art is “a demand and not a gift:” “Lo que esta pintura da a quien llega a mirarla, no es ese gozo, ni esa justificación de nuestra idolatría que estamos dispuestos a arrebatar a la obra de arte; es una solicitud de nuestra propia fe, de nuestra propia inteligencia.”<sup>47</sup> If Rivera’s murals and paintings “formed eyes” ready to “receive that which he gives,” Lazo’s paintings abandon any such pretenses. The rejection of their “patriarchial magistry” is explicit by the end of the text: “No traen estos dibujos un mensaje, como se acostumbra decir, que me impusieran la condición de interpretar. Ni un enigma, que me impusieran la obligación de penetrar.”<sup>48</sup> This rejection, as we have seen, is but the rejection of both possession and satisfied desire.

The 1932 debate was structured around strong dichotomies: nationalism vs. cosmopolitanism; the strong and virile vs. the effeminate. Here, emphasis has been placed on a less visible dichotomy – the general vs. the specialized – which, however, informs both questions

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<sup>44</sup> Cuesta, “La pintura superficial,” 145.

<sup>45</sup> Cuesta, “La pintura superficial,” 145.

<sup>46</sup> Cuesta, “La pintura superficial,” 145.

<sup>47</sup> Cuesta, “La pintura superficial,” 148.

<sup>48</sup> Cuesta, “La pintura superficial,” 148.

of national and gender identity. Indeed, what both nationalism and virility implied was the symbolic production of subjects through art or, in the words of one polemist, the art of “penetrating consciousness.” For Cuesta, specialization implied first of all a negative movement by which art relinquished its “patriarchal magistry.” Against the art of “penetrating consciousness,” he conceived an art of “surfaces” through the experience of observing and being observed by Agustín Lazo’s paintings. What surfaces implied was a form of chastity, a gaze that refused both to penetrate or to be penetrated. The result was described by Cuesta as an *obstruction* between the senses and the spirit, an impossibility to find in Lazo’s work anything but the pure, sensual enjoyment of its object.

Like all forms of chastity, then, the one described by Cuesta does not aim to repress desire but to feed and prolong it. It is satisfaction which is repressed, but only in order that desire may not find rest in its quest for a “perpetual beyond.” Indeed, “La pintura superficial” ends with an invocation of Stendhal’s famous dictum on beauty: “Que esto [Lazo’s superficiality] no es suficiente para nuestro deseo, que esto apenas puede justificarse como la promesa de otro gozo mejor [...] Stendhal, este finísimo espíritu, que mereció ser acusado de superficial, dio esta definición de la belleza que, a pesar de su superficialidad, nunca se profundiza demasiado: <<la belleza es una promesa de dicha>>.” In this sense, Cuesta’s substitutes art’s “patriarchal magistry” for a *fin’amors*, a refined love “that at once enjoys and defers, negates and affirms, accepts and repels,” to borrow Giorgio Agamben’s definition of the *doce stil novo*.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, Cuesta’s superficial gaze implies that *eros* itself becomes an art (“lo que pretende no es la posesión

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<sup>49</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), XVIII

de la realidad, sino un nuevo modo de poseerla”) and that the only thing art has to offer, precisely by rejecting the task of penetrating consciousness, is “the endless joy of erotic experience.”<sup>50</sup>

### *III. The Diabolical Science of Poetry: Eros, Fascination and the Object of Knowledge*

For Cuesta, specialization – “la fuerza que crea dividiendo” – in the field of artistic production meant, first of all, a relinquishment of art’s pedagogic function. Yet this act did not imply an absolute break between the artistic and the pedagogic fields. Cuesta was adamant that all forms of art were “un método de análisis, un instrumento de investigación.”<sup>51</sup> What specialization meant, in this sense, was that art took its place *alongside* other forms of knowledge production, such as the experimental sciences. In “El diablo en la poesía” (1934) he wrote: “Nada me parece más vano que la distinción escolar que se hace a cada instante entre la ciencia y la poesía, entre la inteligencia y la imaginación, y con la que no se pretende, abierta o secretamente, sino despojar a la poesía de su carácter de ciencia, que es su carácter diabólico, a fin de poder identificarla con la fe, que es la ciencia del ángel.”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, experimental sciences presented Cuesta, a chemist, with a working model for modern poetry. In other words, Cuesta’s scientific poetry (*la ciencia de la poesía*) implied the production, not of synthetic subjects, but of analytic objects: “El crecimiento de todas las ciencias ofrece un espectáculo semejante: su objeto se ha distinguido y limitado en la medida en que han aumentado su perfección y su exactitud.” As we shall see, however, the “diabolical” (and, for Cuesta, revolutionary) nature of both science and poetry laid in the unreachability of their objects: they were objects of “fascination,” always beyond the reach of the subject.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Agamben, *Stanzas*, XIX .

<sup>51</sup> Cuesta, “Notas,” 89.

<sup>52</sup> Cuesta, “El diablo en la poesía,” 245-246.

<sup>53</sup> The relations between poetry and science have produced some of the most interesting scholarship on Cuesta. In *Itinerario de una disidencia* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1983), Louis Panabière defends “la importancia significativa” in Cuesta’s professional choice as chemist. But this significance leads Panabière to simply identify chemistry and poetry: “La química es la forma más perfecta del diálogo del hombre con la materia...”; “...la



One of the most unfortunate consequences of Cuesta's posthumous canonization has been the exaltation of subjectivity, individuality and originality as the proper attributes of the artist.<sup>54</sup> Yet these values could not be farther away from Cuesta. If he defended the freedom of art against the nationalist-pedagogic program, this was never done in the name of art's subjects, but of its objects: freedom meant precisely the critical void between the object and the subjects that produced and consumed it. This (strategic?) misunderstanding has been challenged by Francisco Segovia's *Jorge Cuesta: la cicatriz en el espejo*, an essay full of wonderful, if somewhat chaotic, insights. Segovia is right when he points out that "[a] Cuesta le preocupaba el problema del objeto tanto en la ciencia como en la crítica literaria" and that "Cuesta reconoce en toda ciencia la construcción de un objeto."<sup>55</sup> Segovia quotes Cuesta's famous essay on Marx (1935), "Marx no era inteligente, ni científico, ni revolucionario; tampoco socialista, sino contrarrevolucionario y místico": "En la base de toda ciencia hay una limitación del objeto, un aislamiento de los procesos cuyas conexiones

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química fue en efecto un proyecto poético como la poesía fue un proyecto químico." See "El impulso hacia el conocimiento." Inés Arredondo (curiously, Francisco Segovia's mother), in her brief and insightful *Aproximaciones a Jorge Cuesta*, argues that poetry and science were united in their war against nature, that is, against time: "Quizá no sería ocioso recordar, y hasta subrayaría su lucha contra la naturaleza, que Jorge Cuesta, químico, a quien gustaba oírse llamar 'el más triste de los alquimistas', se dedicó a buscar una fórmula para suspender el proceso natural de la futa hasta la maduración durante meses [...] pero bien pronto se vio que no se trataba en realidad de eso, sino de la lucha contra la naturaleza, cuando después del éxito de estos experimentos comenzó a inyectarse a sí mismo, a experimentar en su cuerpo fórmulas semejantes a las que le habían servido en el caso de las frutas. Quería detener su propio proceso biológico en un desafío abierto no solo a la naturaleza, sino a la muerte." See *Obras completas* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores, 1988). For Verónica Vokow, on the other hand, scientific knowledge provided Cuesta with a model for the formation of a literary tradition: "Habría para él en la poesía moderna una sucesiva cadena <<demoniaca>> - de la misma manera que una serie de transformaciones revolucionarias en el conomiento generan el cuerpo siempre creciente de la ciencia." See *Los gladiadores demoníacos* (Sevilla: Renacimiento, 2009). Like many others, Carlos Montemayor unites science and poetry by resurrecting alchemy: "la idea del conocimiento oculto." See *Tres Contemporáneos* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1981). Finally, in Alejandro Katz's seminal reading, *Jorge Cuesta o la alegría del guerrero*, he offers an argument that is a bit too postmodernish: science and poetry are related because "[p]ara Cuesta conocer es, ya lo dijimos, mentir." But it might be that the most succinct and clarifying definition was written by Xavier Villaurrutia, a few days after Cuesta's suicide: "¡Esta su vocación de químico lo llevo a establecer entre la literatura y las ciencias sutiles y peligrosos vasos comunicantes!"

<sup>54</sup> Think for, example, of Christopher Domínguez Michael's *Diccionario crítico de la literatura mexicana 1955-2011* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2012) - a dictionary of names rather than works or even historical periods. It is the absolute opposite of Cuesta's definition of the 1928 Anthology of Modern Poetry as an effort to "arrancar a cada objeto de su sombra."

<sup>55</sup> Francisco Segovia, *Jorge Cuesta: la cicatriz en el espejo* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2004): 23,101.

pretende determinar [...] Por esta razón, cada ciencia aísla a su objeto en el seno de la experiencia universal cambiante y compleja.” For Cuesta, to “isolate” an object meant precisely to distance it from any form of subjectivity.<sup>56</sup> In the same essay, Cuesta wrote on the science of political economy: “...no la hicieron hasta que los hombres no reconocieron el carácter objetivo de la experiencia económica: hasta que no pudieron separarla, aislarla de toda especie concreta de subjetividad.” Here, the “objective character” of economics does not imply any kind of eternal or immutable ground (Cuesta: “Todo principio científico impone a la experiencia que conoce un carácter condicional”) but the fact that knowledge has its foundation on an artificial, isolated object and not on a subject’s interiority. Segovia rightly concludes that Cuesta’s scientific poetry designates “una verdad sin sujeto” whose words aim to “deshacerse de la contingencia del Yo, del sujeto que las dice...”<sup>57</sup>

And yet, this is but half the picture. Cuesta’s dictum -- “*la poesía como ciencia es la concepción cuya fascinante perversidad todavía no llega a admirarse como se debe*”-- was fully developed in “El diablo en la poesía,” an essay dedicated to the poetry of Xavier Villaurrutia and his “predecessors,” Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire. Indeed, as far back as 1927, Cuesta had written of Poe’s poetic and critical methods: “La crítica de Poe no está lejos de parecer una pura actitud científica, una actividad intelectual que se ejerce sobre un objeto perfectamente

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<sup>56</sup> Cuestas’ dislike of socialism and Marxism, as well as his “road to liberal hell” (?), have been discussed in Sánchez Prado, “El alquimista liberal: Jorge Cuesta y la invención del intelectual,” in *Naciones intelectuales*. Here, Sánchez Prado falls in the commonplace of Mexican cultural liberalism, and assumes that for Cuesta Marxism was a religion. But that is only the starting point. Indeed, Cuesta’s insistence that Marxism was a religion targeted its supposed “scientific materialism.” For Cuesta, Marxism was not scientific, it was radically subjective; its scientific object was the possession and transformation of subjects’ “consciousness.” Moreover, it identified human social history with the natural history of the universe itself. Thus, for Cuesta, the problem with Marxism was not that it was a religion (Cuesta actually admired Marx “religious temperament” and proclaimed him one of the 19th-century most important moralists), but that it was a religion pretending to be a science.

<sup>57</sup> Segovia, *Jorge Cuesta*, 101. Here, Segovia develops a point made by Alejandro Katz, for whom Cuesta’s writings “erradica de sí misma el sujeto [...] para restituir a la historia su pluralidad.” It seems to me that Segovia is right in moving Cuesta’s impersonal writing praxis from the sphere of history to the sphere of science.

delimitado por el cálculo.”<sup>58</sup> Poe signaled for Cuesta the beginning of modern poetry as an impulse antagonistic to romanticism: “Es Edgar Allan Poe el primero que se vale de tal artificio para oponerse a la literatura romántica. Emplea, primero que nadie, un orden meditado que organiza sobre una misma finalidad los objetos reunidos en la obra artística que emprende...”<sup>59</sup> We shall deal at depth with Cuesta’s notion of romanticism later. For now, let us note that Poe’s “artificio” is imposed upon “cada sentimiento, de cada personaje con el oficio que un propósito calculado les impone.” His supernatural, fantastical narrations “desnaturalizan los datos reales con que las alimenta.” And his poetry is but the necessity of rigor: “Y al llevar a su poesía un rigor lógico semejante, descubre la necesidad de someterla también a un propósito perfectamente definido.” In this sense, the transition from romantic to modern poetry is the transition from the subject of art to its artificial, rigorously detached object. It was this denial of the subject in favor of an experimental object – an object “isolated from the complex and changing universal experience” – which ultimately defined, for Cuesta, all forms of the avant-garde. Returning to this in 1940, he wrote on surrealism:

El movimiento sobrerrealista se propuso desde su origen un objeto experimental: se propuso *extender* el campo de la experiencia sensible en cierta dirección; no se propuso abarcar en todas las direcciones dicho campo [...] el arte que se proponga investigar un nuevo campo desconocido, si llega a hacer con la pasión de los sobrerrealistas, no tendrá ojos sino para la contemplación de su objeto particular; y olvidará al sobrerrealismo, como los sobrerrealistas olvidaron todo lo demás.<sup>60</sup>

Against the humanistic command to express a synthetic totality through art, the avant-garde’s “experimental” quality resided on its will to “extend” sensory experience in a “certain direction” – it substituted the expression of “life” for “passion” towards a “particular object.”

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<sup>58</sup> Cuesta, “Notas,” 92.

<sup>59</sup> Cuesta, “Notas,” 91.

<sup>60</sup> Cuesta, “Contestación a la encuesta de la revista ‘Romance’ sobre arte,” 519.

It was indeed a form of “passion” which defined the relations of science and poetry to their objects. In “El diablo en la poesía,” Cuesta defined this erotic relation as “fascination:” “La poesía es la tentación, es lo que solicita desde lejos. Por eso no son sensibles a ella las mentes ocupadas por su proximidad, conformes con la apariencia de las cosas, sin avidez de conocer, sin gusto por la ciencia, que es el deseo de lo que está remoto [...] Lo que está próximo, lo que es fácilmente accesible es incapaz de fascinar, de poseer el atractivo del demonio.”<sup>61</sup> As we have seen, part of the 1932 polemic developed around the issue of accessibility: to fulfill its humanistic-pedagogic function, literature and the arts had first of all to reach as many subjects as possible. Here, we can see that what was at stake for Cuesta in the issue of accessibility was not the number of people art was able to reach, but its capacity to *fascinate*, to produce a kind of phantasm (from the Greek *phantazein*) which “calls from afar.” In this sense, the charge of “obscurity” leveled against Cuesta and the *Contemporáneos* was absolutely right, but for all the wrong reasons. “Obscurity” was never related to “elitism” – as if the *Contemporáneos* purpose had been to write poetry that excluded as many people as possible. It was rather related to “temptation” and “seduction” – poetry veiled itself in order both to affirm and negate the subject’s desire, to call the subject to a “perpetual beyond” that affords, in an inversion of the old Job’s lament, neither rest nor understanding: “...la belleza no está en lo que complace, sino en lo que fascina y se hace perseguir más allá de los sentidos, más allá de la satisfacción, adonde solo la fantasía puede probar el alcance y la precisión de su poder.”<sup>62</sup> Beauty, for Cuesta, was always a perverted pleasure: a detour and a diversion, a turning away from, a crooked path.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Cuesta, “El diablo en la poesía,” 246.

<sup>62</sup> Cuesta, “El diablo en la poesía,” 246.

<sup>63</sup> Segovia analyzes the workings of “fascination” in Cuesta’s review of Mae West’s *I’m No Angel*, “Una mujer de gran estilo.” Segovia concludes: “[e] arte es esa seducción que promete una dicha que jamás se cumple literalmente como dicha sino sólo como promesa; la promesa de la dicha es dicha ella misma en cuanto representación, en cuanto ficción, y se corrompe si se entrega reduciéndose a una cosa, a un uso, a un útil.”

The science of poetry was thus the science of fascination: an eros that lived by rejecting its satisfaction, which spelled its own death. If Poe initiated modern poetry by producing “an object perfectly demarcated by calculation,” it was Baudelaire who best understood that this was an object not of satisfaction but of fascination: “Fue Baudelaire el primero que se atrevió a ver en la poesía de una manera absoluta, a la <<flor del mal>>, a la flor de la perversidad; fue el primero que la concibió como una pura fascinación, como un puro diabolismo.”<sup>64</sup> Both movements – the demarcation of an object from the totality of experience and its turning into an object of fantasy and fascination – are for Cuesta the foundations of modern poetry: only by isolating itself from “life” can poetry become an object of infinite desire. Like modern science, what modern poetry loses in amplitude it gains in depth; it becomes unreachable only as it becomes fragmented. Without Poe and Baudelaire “no se explican una tan transparente verdad de la ficción, una tan exacta inteligencia de lo imprevisto, un tan lúcido rigor del azar [...] en que *la ciencia poética* ningún límite traza a su demoniaca pasión de conocer.”<sup>65</sup> Science and poetry are thus two instances of the same passion: the “demonic passion to know,” which finds no place of rest or understanding. Indeed, “ésta es la acción *científica del diablo*: convertir a todo en problemático, hacer de toda cosa un puro objeto intelectual.”<sup>66</sup> To turn everything into a pure intellectual object means to place

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<sup>64</sup> Cuesta, “El diablo en la poesía,” 245. In *Los gladiadores demoníacos* (Sevilla: Renacimiento, 2009), Verónica Volkow offers three interpretations of Cuesta’s uses of Baudelaire: “La <<ingeniería diabólica>> de Baudelaire,” “Baudelaire y su identidad múltiple,” and “Dos retratos de Baudelaire en Cuesta.” I find the first of these to be the closest to my present argument, where Volkow argues that Baudelaire functioned in Cuesta’s work as a “guía social del goce moderno,” as well as a figure that recognized that “el artista es simplemente un especialista” and sought a new form of totality by becoming *un homme de monde*.

<sup>65</sup> Cuesta, “El diablo en la poesía,” 245.

<sup>66</sup> Cuesta, “El diablo en la poesía,” 245. Alejandro Katz highlights the similarities between Cuesta’s and Michel Foucault’s positions. Katz quotes an interview given by Foucault to Francois Ewald: “La noción que sirve de forma común a los estudios que desarrollé desde la *Historia de la locura* es la de *problematización* [...] Problematización no quiere decir representación de un objeto preexistente, ni tampoco creación por el discurso de un objeto que no existe. Es el conjunto de las prácticas discursivas o no discursivas que hace entrar cualquier cosa en el juego de lo verdadero y de lo falso y lo constituye en objeto del pensamiento...” Quoted from Katz, *La alegría del guerrero*, 26. The original interview is entitled “Le souci de la vérité.” Its English translation can be found in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

it beyond consumption and appropriation, to make the object itself the site of the “perpetual beyond” that desire needs to feed and preserve itself.

For Cuesta, this was the fundamental operation carried out by Xavier Villaurrutia’s scientific poetry. If Lazo’s was an art of surfaces, Villaurrutia’s was a poetry of *distances*: “Los actos y los objetos que contempla esta poesía son los más próximos y más familiares. Pero ¡cómo desaparecen, de repente, su tacto y su figura habitual! Se abre un abismo en ellos y su sólida apariencia se disuelve, como el carácter de las personas en quienes se descubre un insospechado doblez.”<sup>67</sup> It was, in Freud’s terms (of his generation, Cuesta was one of the few attentive readers of psychoanalysis), a poetry of the *uncanny*, a space where everything familiar loses itself and turns into its phantasm, the unreachable image of itself.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, what the poetic/scientific distance of Villaurrutia’s poetry implied was a new relation between an object and the bodily senses: “El oído es <<el laberinto de la oreja>>; el tacto es unas <<manos de hielo>>; los ojos se abren <<donde la sombra es más dura>>.”<sup>69</sup> As the object reveals “an unexpected duplicity,” the subject itself becomes destabilized, loses itself in the space opened between the object and its shadow. Here, in the poetic distance where nothing is identical to itself, only the devil is at ease: “Sólo el demonio, solo la fantasía se encuentran en este medio a sus anchas, en donde cada ruido *no es el que se oye*, sino otro ruido diferente; en donde la sombra es la luz; en donde la voz <<es como un recuerdo en la garganta>>; en donde se está después de <<haber dejado pies y brazos en la orilla>>.”<sup>70</sup> The only condition to enter into this realm of phantasy is to “desprenderse de toda

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<sup>67</sup> Cuesta, “El diablo en la poesía,” 246.

<sup>68</sup> See Freud, “The Uncanny” in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* (New York: The Modern Library, 1938).

<sup>69</sup> Cuesta, “El diablo en la poesía,” 246.

<sup>70</sup> Cuesta, “El diablo en la poesía,” 246-247.

realidad, de todo afecto, de toda seguridad.” The price the subject must pay for the unreachable object of infinite desire is nothing less than itself, the sense of its own “reality” and “security.”

We can now approach Cuesta’s critique of the “scholarly distinction” between poetry and the sciences as the distinction between an “angelic science” and a “diabolic science.” Much has been written on Cuesta “demonic” character – he has even been pronounced Mexico’s only *poète maudit*.<sup>71</sup> A strange fate for a man known for his extreme timidity, whose voice never went above a whisper and who rarely spared the formal *usted* in conversation with friends and strangers alike. But it has seldom been noticed that Cuesta’s invocation of the demonic was not a call to pleasure and vice, but to a kind of erotic ascetism, if such a paradox be allowed: “Separada, en efecto, de la inteligencia, la poesía consciente a la pasión y es esclavizada por ella, con lo que se *salva su alma del demonio*, se salva de la fascinación, por la imposibilidad que hay de fascinar a un esclavo, incapacitado, como está, por sus cadenas, de ir en pos de lo que lo solicita.”<sup>72</sup> As we can see, it is the “angelic” and not the “demonic” which succumbs to the satisfaction of desire. The “angel” is a “slave” not because he defers pleasure, but precisely because his passion is content and satisfied: “...si en la iglesia católica se señala al enemigo tradicional de la revolución, es porque la Iglesia es, por excelencia, un organismo natural, una fortificación contra el demonio, una organización de la conformidad.” The poet and the revolutionary, on the other hand, live against nature – that is,

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<sup>71</sup> Miguel Capistrán: “Cuesta pudo ser un perfecto personaje de novela gótica o un representante arquetípico de esa fascinante galería que integran los *poètes maudites* [...] ha proliferado durante tantos años el mito del poema y alquimista loco, fue también un pervertido sexual obsesionado por una pasión incestuosa.” See *Los Contemporáneos por sí mismos* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1994), 143. For a more balanced account of Cuesta’s “demonism,” see *Los gladiadores demoníacos*, where Volkow defines three dimensions of Cuesta’s “demonism:” the opposition between nature and art; the scission of the self into two, irreconcilable parts; and the scission in Cuesta’s poetry itself, where the poem is an answer to a question that is not explicitly formulated but can only be conjectured from the poem itself. In a sense, Alejandro Katz’s *La alegría del guerrero*, where Cuesta is seen as a “sophist” bent on destroying every form of certainty, is but an over-generalization of the “demonic” element in Cuesta.

<sup>72</sup> Cuesta, “El diablo en la poesía,” 246.

*against the satisfaction of one's own desires.* The demonic is that which continually rejects satisfaction and is endlessly driven by its “passion to know.”

The distinction between “angelic” and “demonic” sciences was that between two objects of knowledge: one that merged itself with its subject; and another object, forever distant, an object of infinite desire. That poetry “gives itself,” as we saw in the case of Diego Rivera’s paintings, means that it fulfills its “paternal magisterial” function – it prepares the subject to “recibir aquello que da.” It strives to *communicate* the kind of knowledge that refuses a “perpetual beyond” and effects a consummation. Thus, the distinction between poetry and science “pretende, abierta o secretamente [...] despojar a la poesía de su carácter de ciencia, que es su carácter diabólico, a fin de poder identificarla con la fe...” For Cuesta, objects of “faith” were not agonizingly aloof, impossible to reach except by, say, Kierkegaard’s mortal leap. “Faith” names that which is at hand and which the subject’s passion can devour – and thus be *subjected* to the object. What was aloof, and should be kept far away, was not faith but knowledge. Such was the task of the diabolical science of poetry. By making everything “problematic,” by turning all things into “pure intellectual objects,” poetry places them at an unreachable distance and does not grant the subject the chance to re-collect the self.

Therefore, a final question arises: if satisfaction is always denied, if the object of infinite desire is perpetually out of reach, what kind of knowledge do modern poetry and art *actually* yield? Poetry as a form of knowledge has been a source of distress for Cuesta scholars. There is, if not a full consensus, at least an undisputed agreement in Adolfo Castañón’s formalist argument: “Si es cierto que la literatura es una forma de conocimiento, no lo es menos que se trata de un conocimiento de las formas, es decir, de las constantes subyacentes de las figuras de la sensibilidad



pública y privada.”<sup>73</sup> For Castañón, then, formalism implies the study of “figures” of private and public sensibility. It is a subjectivist interpretation of “form,” one hard to reconcile with the scientific rigor Cuesta demanded of poetry --the rigor of surfaces and distances which denied subjective identification between subject and object.<sup>74</sup>

Now, it seems to me that, for Cuesta, poetry’s formalism had nothing to do with the expression of any kind of “sensibility,” but simply expressed a certain level of poetic and analytic rigor. Inés Arredondo is closer to the truth about Cuesta’s scientific poetry: “...el objeto de la disputa es el conocimiento *indeterminado*, el personaje *azaroso*...”<sup>75</sup> The kind of knowledge akin to Cuesta’s scientific and diabolic poetry was both a knowledge of *praxis* and a praxis of *knowledge*. By this, I mean that for Cuesta moments of poetic insight and satisfaction were actually possible, but only by a kind of fortuitous accident: “...en la poesía, hay que soportar el hastío y proceder como el hombre de ciencia: a través de las experiencias más tediosas y superfluas, por medio de las imaginaciones más vanas y extravagantes, y sin violentar al azar.”<sup>76</sup> We have seen that modern poetry “lo que pretende no es la posesión de la realidad, sino un nuevo modo de poseerla [...] ¡Como si fuera una estratagema para engañarla y sorprenderla!” The kind of

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<sup>73</sup> Adolfo Castañón, “La desaparición de los ensayistas,” in *Los Contemporáneos en el laberinto de la crítica*, ed. Rafael Olea Franco and Anthony Stanton (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1994).

<sup>74</sup> Poetry as form of Knowledge, however, has a large trajectory, which goes back to Vico, Heine, Goethe, Croce or Cuesta’s contemporary Paul Valéry—who also found in science a useful paragon. Undoubtedly, Cuesta was a pioneer in Spanish in the modern consideration of poetry as a form of essential knowledge, a position than later would be followed by María Zambrano, José María Valente, Ramón Xirau or the Venezuelan philosopher, who wrote in English, Eliseo Vivas or in French Henry Meschonnic. “La poesía sufre el martirio del conocimiento,” said Zambrano, “padece por la lucidez, por la videncia. Padece, porque la poesía sigue siendo mediación y en ella la conciencia no es signo de poder, sino necesidad ineludible para que una palabra se cumpla. Claridad precisa para que lo que está diseñado no más en la niebla, se fije y precise; adquiera ‘número, peso y medida.’” See Eliseo Vivas, *Vivas as Critic: Essays in Poetics and Criticism*, Hugh Mercer Curtler (ed.), (Troy, N.Y.: Whitston Pub. Co., 1982); María Zambrano, *Filosofía y poesía* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987); José Ángel Valente, *Las palabras de la tribu* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1994); Ramón Xirau *Poesía y conocimiento* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1978); Henri Meschonnic, *Les états de la poétique* (Paris: PUF, 1985).

<sup>75</sup> Arredondo, “Acercamiento,” 302. Italics in the original.

<sup>76</sup> Cuesta, “El diablo en la poesía,” 246.

knowledge through poetry Cuesta fashioned after the experimental sciences could thus be defined as the art of serendipity, “el rigor del azar,” in his own words.<sup>77</sup> In the quest for its unreachable object, the demonic passion to know suddenly finds an object different to the image of its desire, different precisely because it is real. It is, in quite a literal sense, a *perverted* knowledge which gives a *perverted* pleasure. It can only be attained by indirect methods, poetic fetishes: metaphors and analogies, harmonies and rhythm, colors and sounds. And it only happens *in praxis*, through the act of poetry, *in the mist* of the act of writing poetry.

Cuesta had another name for this crooked path: *adventure*. Villaurrutia’s poetry represents “el riesgo de la poesía en uno de los recorridos de su aventura intelectual;” to read him is to “confiarse a la aventura imprevisible de la inteligencia; es preciso no temer los abismos que a cada paso se abren.”<sup>78</sup> Adventure is the movement towards an unknown destination – its results are unforeseeable, and yet completely real. In this sense, it is a mode of knowledge opposed to the pedagogic, which (as Cuesta wrote of North American critic Thomas Craven) “sigue siempre los caminos que lo devuelven al sitio de donde partió.” For Cuesta, adventure is always experimental: it ignores its place of arrival, abysses are opened at every step. But these gaps are precisely what keeps passion moving onwards, what prevent passion from exhausting itself.

Against knowledge as an object to be possessed, adventure implies that poetic knowledge is, above all, a particular praxis: the effort to fool reality, but only in order to surprise it and actually find it, even if it recedes from our gaze once again. It is a knowledge of perversion. This kind of

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<sup>77</sup> Curiously enough, in the 1970s, with no knowledge of Cuestas’ ideas, J. A. Valente elaborated a kindred view of poetry. “Sabido es que los grandes (felices o terribles) acontecimientos de la vida,” wrote Valente, “pasan . . . casi sin que nos demos cuenta.” And poetry deals with this lived but not a priori known reality. Poetry, thus, said Valente, is a ‘gran caer en la cuenta.’”

<sup>78</sup> Cuesta, “El diablo en la poesía,” 246-247.

knowledge is not transmissible through the “paternal magistrery” of either a father or a teacher. It is the very opposite. It can only be actualized and recuperated through praxis – a shared praxis is the condition *sine qua non* for this kind of communication to be possible. For Cuesta, this is the knowledge that every specialized discipline ultimately affords: the knowledge of itself as a particular praxis, which, in the case of both poets and critics, can only be that of literary language, the paradoxical language of rigor and chance.<sup>79</sup>

“Specialization” in poetry and the arts meant a relinquishment *of and from* their “paternal magistrery.” Poetry’s “paternal magistrery” was, for Cuesta, sustained by the distinction between poetry and the experimental sciences, between imagination and intellect. As poetry took its place alongside other forms of specialized knowledge (with the experimental sciences at the front), it turned from a total object of “satisfaction” which *subjected*, to a fragmented object of “fascination” which tempted endlessly. This was indeed the difference between the science of the angels and the science of the devil. Poetry and the arts became themselves the objects of infinite desire, the demonic passion to know. This demonic passion could only find satisfaction in a *perverted* knowledge and pleasure – a pleasure found in the unexpected detour of the real: “El demonio es perverso; usa caminos largos y tortuosos.” Thus, the poetic distance produced by literary language between the object of knowledge and the subject’s satisfaction was the space of adventure: not the anguished void, but the stormy sea, with the un-fore-seen yet undeniably real object awaiting beyond the horizon. This was the space of praxis, of improvisation, of what could only be found by not looking for it, by actually looking for something else. If Cuesta wanted to “deshacerse de

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<sup>79</sup> Here, Cuesta echoed parts of Paul Valéry’s writings on science and poetics. But it is important to note that Cuesta had only a fragmentary knowledge of Valéry’s writings, the ones he could find in foreign magazines. For an early general view of Valéry, see Edouard Roditi, “Paul Valéry: Poetics as an Exact Science,” *The Kenyon Review* 6, no. 3 (Summer, 1944): 398-408. For a discussion of Valéry’s concept of “pure poetry” and its influence on Cuesta, see Anthony Stanton’s “Los Contemporáneos y el debate en torno a la poesía pura,” in *Los Contemporáneos en el laberinto de la crítica*.

la contingencia del Yo” through poetry, as Francisco Segovia argues, it was only to let “el rigor del azar” happen; it was not to do away with the ‘I’ but to poetically deny its satisfaction and turn it into a void where infinite desire may play out its perverted chase of the real.

*IV. Matter and Form, a Love Affair: Romanticism, Preciosismo, Classicism*

“Tus ojos son los ojos de un hombre enamorado;  
tus labios son los labios de un hombre que no cree  
en el amor”. “Entonces dime el remedio, amigo,  
si están en desacuerdo realidad y deseo”.

Luis Cernuda, “Música cautiva”

Seen within the trajectory of Mexican cultural criticism, Jorge Cuesta’s works sign the moment when part of the field of cultural production recognizes its own praxis as a specialized activity, as a *discipline*. Unlike the previous generation of poets and intellectuals from the Ateneo, the *Contemporáneos* rejected the humanist-pedagogic function of poetry and the arts, which promoted a “generalist” praxis of literary production and consumption. What this generalist practice sought was *accessibility* – only through it could literature and the arts maintain their “patriarchal magisterial” function, which was also, as Ignacio Sánchez Prado argues, its organic relation to the postrevolutionary State.<sup>80</sup>

We should now say that this rejection in the realm of poetic praxis was accompanied by a kind of mirror rejection in the world of professional praxis – except for Jaime Torres Bodet, who actually managed to become president of UNESCO, the rest of *Contemporáneos* were obscure,

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<sup>80</sup> Sánchez Prado defines public education as the field which linked artists and intellectuals to the State, a relation the changed drastically from Vasconcelos magistry in 1921-1924 to his break with power in 1929: “En términos del espacio que unía al campo de producción cultural con el campo de poder, la educación, viene otra transformación fundamental, la ruptura de Vasconcelos con el Estado, a raíz de su derrota electoral en 1929, y el ascenso a la Secretaría de Educación Pública del socialista Narciso Bassols en 1931, quien posibilitaría aún más el acceso de los intelectuales socialistas a nichos culturales y de poder.” *Naciones Intelectuales*, 84.

middle-ranged bureaucrats. They lacked the messianic drive of their predecessors, the ideal of national regeneration through culture and education. Even though some of them participated in the early years of José Vasconcelos massive alphabetization campaign, by the late 1920's most of them were ironically conscious that a position in the government was simply that: a way to get money to write poetry. Guillermo Sheridan points out that in the 1932 polemic there was more than literature at risk: positions at the Ministry of Education were the ultimate stakes.<sup>81</sup> The *Contemporáneos* sinful desire to approach the professional man of letters, as Jesús S. Soto wrote in 1932, was much the graver for being committed *on government money*. How could poetry abandon its pedagogical function, when the Ministry paid the poet's salaries? But even in disgrace, the *Contemporáneos* found ways to make a living: when out of grace with a particular Minister, they wrote for the radio, the movies, the television and the newspapers for some extra income.<sup>82</sup> Cuesta himself ambulated from post to post in the State's bureaucracy, while publishing articles in the major national newspapers –it is no secret that he *vendió su pluma*, “sold his pen” to the highest bidder many a time.

The *Contemporáneos*' specialized poetic activity was thus crucially marked by their professional situation. As Jesús S. Soto wrote during the 1932 polemic, “[...] su anhelo ha sido aproximarse al mejor tipo de profesional ‘hombre de letras’, en un ambiente en que su labor carecería de sentido desde antes de iniciarse.” Even if poetry became a specialized practice, none of its participants could ever really become professional poets, for the simple reason that they could not make a living out of it. Cuesta expressed the situation perfectly in a letter to Bernardo

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<sup>81</sup> See Sheridan's excellent “Chamba y biología,” in the introduction to *México en 1932*, 60-63.

<sup>82</sup> Mecenazgo was an imbedded practice of the *Contemporáneos* cultural endeavors. Their experimental theatre group, Teatro Ulises, was supported by Antonieta Rivas Mercado; Bernardo J. Gastélum gave Villaurrutia and Cuesta jobs at the Ministry of Education so they could write, and Minister of Education Narciso Bassols later did the same; Nigel Sylvestre relates that the polemic 1928 anthology was financed by none other than Álvaro Obregón.

Ortiz de Montellano: "...no sabríamos decir, hasta ahora, que la literatura es para nosotros una profesión; menos podríamos decir que es una profesión de fe..."<sup>83</sup> I believe that Cuesta registers this truncated process of specialization in the very way he conceives Mexican literary history. Cuesta's history of Mexican literature was informed by three crucial categories: romanticism, *preciosismo*, and classicism. There is no sense in approaching these terms in a purely conventional way.<sup>84</sup> Although they were informed by contemporary discussions (Gide's defense of "classicism" and "universalism" against Charles Maurras comes to mind), these categories have very particular meanings in Cuesta's conceptual architecture. They follow a sacrificial logic, where the romantic subject is detached from the object of poetry by the "artificial rigor" of *preciosismo*. In another sense, the sacrificial detachment of the *preciosista* object from the romantic subject was imagined by Cuesta as a kind of negative love affair between poetry's matter and its form – not a consummation but a tortuous distance. Classicism lay beyond this act of self-negation, but always beyond: "El clasicismo es una literatura y un arte imprevistos."<sup>85</sup> Consequently, classicism becomes the object of "una expectación, una espera."<sup>86</sup> Indeed, it was impossible for Cuesta and *Contemporáneos* to envision anything beyond the negative act of sacrificial rigor demanded by specialization – whatever the classic was, one could only wait for its startling appearance.

In "La crítica del demonio," Christopher Domínguez Michael tries to make sense of Cuesta's "historia trágica de la poesía mexicana." For Domínguez Michael, this "tragic history" is the result of Cuesta's "Faustian" situation: "El problema de Fausto es la urgencia por pactar con

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<sup>83</sup> Cuesta, "Carta a Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano," 216.

<sup>84</sup> Martía Stooopen keenly writes: "Aunque por momentos toma en cuenta la historicidad de dichos movimientos, a la vez desliga el ciclo de una dimensión histórica, con lo cual sugiere su continua renovación. Esta idea resulta disutible a la luz de la historia del arte..." And she also suggests a different logic from history for Cuesta's categories: "Cuesta precisa sus cánones estéticos cuando enfrente realidad e ideal como aspiraciones del arte." "Introducción," *Jorge Cuesta: Ensayos Críticos*, 54.

<sup>85</sup> Cuesta, "El vanguardismo y el antivanguardismo," 139.

<sup>86</sup> Cuesta, "Salvador Díaz Mirón," 501.

una tradición a cambio de su crítica.”<sup>87</sup> It is not clear the meaning of “critique” in Domínguez Michael’s essay. A Kantian investigation into transcendental limits? Is it simply literary criticism, like that written by Oscar Wilde and Alfonso Reyes? Or is it critique in its vulgar sense: the pointing out of moral flaw? It is not clear what “tradition” means either. Ultimately, it seems that “tragedy” refers to Cuesta’s “heroic” effort to imagine an alternative literary history – European, Western – to the one offered to Mexican poetry by official nationalism. Therefore, it is Cuesta’s figure that is ultimately tragic: “La justificación del silencio de Díaz Mirón es, también, una proyección del propio destino de Cuesta, como si al referirse al heroísmo trágico de aquel estuviera prefigurando el propio.”<sup>88</sup> Cuesta’s position as critic is thus supported on his “moral” triumph, the fact that he was “right” and the nationalists were “wrong.” As *literary history*, Domínguez Michael constantly emphasizes, Cuesta’s “tragedy” was full of inaccuracies: he mistook academics for romantics, romantics for modernists, and turned anyone he needed to defend his views into a classic. But all for the right cause! Domínguez Michael’s view approaches a quasi-positivist interpretation of Cuesta’s writings on literary history, and this from someone who is keen on showing the uselessness of academic interpretations.

The logic behind Cuesta’s sacrificial history of Mexican poetry was the logic of a specialized praxis. All roads led there, and further on nothing could be seen. The key notion in this sacrificial history was neither romanticism nor classicism, but *preciosismo*. Cuesta’s reflections on the meaning of artistic *preciosismo* date back to 1927. In what was supposed to be a literary review of Jaime Torres Bodet’s novel *Margarita de Niebla* – simply entitled “Notas” –, Cuesta embarked on a lengthy genealogy of modern art. The piece put at the center the concept of

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<sup>87</sup> Domínguez Michael, “El demonio de la crítica,” 303.

<sup>88</sup> Domínguez Michael, “El demonio de la crítica”, 315.

*preciosismo*, and then at the end situated Torres Bodet in the literary panorama just sketched. For Cuesta, the “virtue” of *preciosismo* was to “desromantizar la realidad.” Although romanticism is vital in Cuesta’s argument, it is not defined in the piece, except as an ambiguous enemy. But we know that, in the effort to “de-romanticize reality,” *preciosismo* involves a particular kind of “reduction” in which

las formas elementales no obedecen a la dirección de su existencia individual, sino solamente a la de su utilidad, a no ser que ambas se confundan. Más subyugadas están mientras más se estilizan, y mientras se especifican más las funciones que las dibujan, su personalidad se pierde y sus perfiles se transforman. Deformar un objeto es dedicarlo a un oficio diverso de aquel que naturalmente posee; y es reducirlo, pues se hace evidente que ningún objeto crecerá en una dirección contraria a su naturaleza.<sup>89</sup>

“Reduction” and “stylization” are, for Cuesta, one and the same thing: style is the “subjection” of “elemental forms.” But the language of domination is soon replaced by that of “sacrifice:” “Cuando la visión del mundo se empequeñece, es cuando el arte estiliza sus formas y sacrifica, ganándola, una parte de la realidad; aquella que no se concierta con la idea que organiza su visión.”<sup>90</sup> It does not seem to me that there is anything nostalgic in Cuesta’s conditional: “when the view of the world contracts.” It reads like a statement of fact, a situation out of which artistic production actually gains something: the fragment of reality it wins by sacrificing its “vision of the world.” Indeed, to stylize, reduce or deform “reality” (all synonyms for Cuesta) meant ultimately to make it a site of passion: “La estiliza, la deforma; lo que quiere decir que la reduce, pero no que deja de vivirla. Es, al contrario, la única manera como puede vivirla sin repugnancia y como puede apasionarse en ella.”<sup>91</sup> Like in the case of Villaurrutia’s scientific poetry,

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<sup>89</sup> Cuesta, “Notas,” 90.

<sup>90</sup> Cuesta, “Notas,” 90.

<sup>91</sup> Cuesta, “Notas,” 90.



*preciosismo* turned every object into the site of a perpetual beyond, the phantasmatic distance where the subject may “become impassioned.”

Cuesta characterized the distinction between romanticism and *preciosismo* as a “specification of functions” (“forms” become “stylized” as the “functions which determine such forms become more specified”). This specification could only be achieved in and through poetic praxis; it did not, and could not, precede the praxis it wanted to produce. For Cuesta, the “specification of functions” of poetic praxis implied the primacy of a poetic “method” over the individual poetic will. The preeminence of method, as we previously saw, was an important part of the meaning Cuesta assigned to Edgar Allan Poe. Consider now Cuesta’s words on Mallarmé, one of Poe’s “successors”:

Invierte su método crítico y en vez de acomodar cada palabra, cada frase, cada cláusula en un solo discurso de una unidad estricta, las cláusulas, las frases, las palabras, tienden a separarse constituyendo unidades casi independientes [...] Fácilmente se observa en sus poemas el procedimiento de su estilo: la sintaxis que se destruye y se construye a sí misma cada instante, deteniendo el movimiento que ella misma conduce; los nombres reflejados en sus propios complementos, haciéndose ellos mismos el objeto de su acción; el cambio sucesivo del sujeto, desdoblándolo, antes de referirlo a su complemento; el cambio, en la misma forma, de la persona a quien el vocativo se dirige; la desviación sobre ellos mismos, con el adjetivo y el adverbio contradictorios, negativos, del sentido de los verbos y de los nombres; etcétera.<sup>92</sup>

The virtue of Mallarmé’s poetry is that the “specification of functions” happens in and through the poetic object itself; “the method of his style” is in plain sight. And this method is but the rigor of fragmentation and detachment, where “each clause, phrase and word” breaks of away from “a single coherent discourse” and becomes its own “quasi-independent unit.” Literary language stops referring itself to the coherent discourse of a subject – syntax “destroys and builds itself at every moment,” subjects and verbs deviate from their “sense.”

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<sup>92</sup> Cuesta, “Notas,” 92-93.

Like Mallarmé in poetry, the master of plastic *preciosismo* was Cézanne: “Los contornos equivalen en Cézanne a la sintaxis en la poesía de Mallarmé. Su movimiento ha sido reducido por esa constante interrupción que los hace afluir cada momento, recogéndolos en seguida, fuera o dentro de la figura y que tan apasionadamente la dibuja.”<sup>93</sup> The specification of functions is thus characterized both as “reduction” and “interruption.” The artistic “object” emerges precisely in the space opened up by the “interruption” which refuses the completion of the image – just as Lazo’s drawings did. *Preciosismo* meant that the arts became *their own objects*: “Dice Brunetière de las formas del estilo burlesco, cuya filiación preciosista descubre, que son *el objeto de ellas mismas*. ¿Es diferente la intención del arte moderno cuando pretende la poesía pura, la música musical y la pintura excesivamente plástica?”<sup>94</sup> That is, the arts became a critical reflection on themselves as a particular social praxis.

Thus, while there is nothing nostalgic about this position, there is something utopian. The negative act of sacrificial rigor was radically historical – it only made sense in light of a future that would redeem it, a future that was the result and the promise of its sacrifice. This was the u-topia of classicism: “Pero cuando crece su curiosidad, dueño del espíritu de su plenitud, el arte encuentra una arquitectura semejante a la del mundo y puede dilatarse por él. La función que impone entonces a las formas con que construye su edificio no las subyuga ni las oprime; al contrario, las deja en libertad...”<sup>95</sup> The sacrifice effected by *preciosismo*, by which it “deromanticized reality,” prepared the way for the classic, where art became a tool for setting “forms” free: “Es un error considerar al clasicismo como un estado al que el romanticismo llega, así sea por reacción [...] Lo que es anterior al clasicismo es el preciosismo, un rigor artificial y exagerado.”<sup>96</sup> In order to prepare

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<sup>93</sup> Cuesta, “Notas,” 93.

<sup>94</sup> Cuesta, “Notas,” 90.

<sup>95</sup> Cuesta, “Notas,” 90.

<sup>96</sup> Cuesta, “Notas,” 96.

classicism, “pedía Nietzsche un arte para artistas, cuyo objeto no fueran sino las imágenes, las combinaciones de líneas, de colores, de sonidos.”<sup>97</sup> In other words, an art for colleagues and fellow professionals. Indeed, Nietzsche “ya adivinaba el arte contemporáneo.” But this was only the propitiatory act for the unforeseen appearance of the classic. In fact, *preciosismo* was only a form of “discipline:”

Hay que tener presente que sólo es una disciplina. Hacer un arte para artistas es una manera de hacerlo para la posteridad, es una manera de hacer la posteridad misma. Con este fin se recluye dentro del rigor que voluntariamente se impone; para que un día pueda libertar su crisálida. Entonces llega el clasicismo, que es la libertad, la más absoluta libertad.”<sup>98</sup>

The sacrifice of art’s “vision of the world,” undertook in order to gain a “fragment of reality,” announces its own overcoming: a “posterity” where its own radical negation may be turned into an affirmation, where its “artificial and exaggerated rigor” turns into “absolute freedom.” It is a new form of nature (a second, a third nature) – classic prose is that in which “la lógica no se distingue de la naturalidad” –, which nevertheless remains aloof, as the u-topia of posterity where the sacrifice’s promise is fulfilled.

Thus, for Cuesta the movement from romanticism to *preciosismo* entailed a history of “discipline” and “rigor,” while classicism remained a utopia where the negative act of “reduction” and “interruption” would be redeemed. Cuesta situates Jaime Torres Bode in these conceptual coordinates. For Cuesta, Torres Bodet’s immediate literary predecessor in the history of Mexican literature was Alfonso Reyes. But Torres Bodet, “cuya novela *Margarita de Niebla* sirvió de pretexto a estas notas [...] se aproxima a Reyes, aunque no para continuarlo. Pues no nace de Reyes la más nueva literatura mexicana; se relaciona con ella de la manera que pretenderemos

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<sup>97</sup> Cuesta, “Notas,” 96.

<sup>98</sup> Cuesta, “Notas,” 96.

definir.”<sup>99</sup> Indeed, if *Margarita de Niebla* was the explicit “excuse” for Cuesta’s notes, the critique of Reyes was the implicit one. For Cuesta, to situate Torres Bodet in literary history meant at the same time to substitute Reyes as the poetic father of the *Contemporáneos*.<sup>100</sup>

What distinguished Torres Bodet from his fellow *Contemporáneos* and brought him close to Alfonso Reyes was a lack of rigor: “Menos rigor lo aprieta y lo depura, menos necesidad lo obliga a una vigilada economía [...] Esto lo acerca a Reyes, y no únicamente con el de *El plano oblicuo* que, sin ser todavía un preciosista, tampoco es un romántico, estrictamente.”<sup>101</sup> Reyes’ ambiguous position between romanticism and *preciosismo* was expressed through his literary language, which “no se abandona nunca, pero tampoco se sujeta; huye de la realidad que está a punto de detenerlo [...] se aparta de lo que puede apasionarlo [...] y la única disciplina a que se atreve es aquella que puede olvidar o en la que puede permanecer sin fatiga.”<sup>102</sup> Cuesta considers Reyes’s classicism to be not only mere appearances, but a disguise: “Lo mismo que hace el defecto de la prosa de Reyes es lo que constituye su atracción. Éste ha sido su talento, sobre todo: hacerse de su defecto una virtud. La falta de rigor visible produce una impresión de libertad [...] Esta aparente libertad, este aparente clasicismo, no es sino su romanticismo disfrazado.”<sup>103</sup> Still, Cuesta finds in Reyes a sincere, if misunderstood, “classic ambition:” “Me pregunto si la actitud de Reyes no se debe a una ambición clásica, a un no conformarse con la pérdida de su libertad. Seguramente esto la produce. Pero la misma ambición se destruye, mientras no se atreva a sacrificarse.”<sup>104</sup> As

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<sup>99</sup> Cuesta, “Notas,” 94.

<sup>100</sup> Critics have carried out extraordinary efforts to make Reyes the Ateneo’s poetic father. See Miguel Capistrán, “México, Alfonso Reyes y los Contemporáneos”; Christopher Domínguez Michael’s reading of Cuestas “Notas,” in “El demonio de la crítica;” Guillermo Sheridan in his “Introducción” to *La polémica nacionalista*. It is true, of course, that most of the *Contemporáneos* had both friendly and very productive relations with Reyes. But friendship and *apadrinamiento* cannot determine this matter. Indeed, it seems to me that the relations Cuesta established in “Notas” between Reyes and the *Contemporáneos* are right on mark.

<sup>101</sup> Cuesta, “Notas,” 95.

<sup>102</sup> Cuesta, “Notas,” 95.

<sup>103</sup> Cuesta, “Notas,” 96.

<sup>104</sup> Cuesta, “Notas,” 96.

we can see, Reyes's classicism is not legitimate because his literary language has not suffered the self-sacrifice of "reduction" and "interruption." He is a romantic "pretending" to be a classic in as much as his quest for classicism is actually a rejection of Nietzsche's "un arte para artistas," for the professionals and specialists of art. Reyes seeks a straight, imaginary path to classicism (as if classicism was right there for the taking, as if it was enough to *will* classicism into being) against the radical historicity of the negative moment of specialization.

Compared to Reyes's, Torres Bodet's prose reveals "...más paciencia, más tenacidad..." It is not that Torres Bodet rejects the "illusion of freedom," but rather that such an illusion is now the product of discipline and effort, not the "turning of vice into virtue:" "...hay algo que resiste, algo que exige esta tenacidad y que hace que su constancia no aparezca como un esfuerzo <<innecesario>>."<sup>105</sup> Cuesta conceives Torres Bodet's novel as the practical critique of Reyes's romanticism in disguise, a critique that necessarily participated in the nature of its object: "Claro es que [Reyes's romanticism in disguise] acabará por destruirse, como ya se observa en la prosa de Torres Bodet..."<sup>106</sup> For Cuesta, then, Torres Bodet's prose marks a particular moment in the national history of the literary language's "discipline" and "rigor." Torres Bodet's prose both reproduces Reyes's "classic ambition" and introduces a critical limit, "something that resists." It opens up, in and through the reality of its language, a literary deviation from Reyes's classicism, declaring that there is no straight path towards the classic, only a crooked path. Indeed, by rejecting the negative moment of self-sacrifice, Reyes had given up the utopia of classicism – turned it into a thing of the past, an object already reached and thus reproducible, rather than the vigilant wait for the unexpected and unforeseeable.

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<sup>105</sup> Cuesta, "Notas," 96.

<sup>106</sup> Cuesta, "Notas," 96.

In “Notas,” Cuesta rejected that the newest Mexican literature was “born out” of Alfonso Reyes. He offered, briefly, an alternative beginning: Salvador Díaz Mirón. This was not only a different departure position, but a different way of starting, opposed to the metaphor of being “born out of:” “Es problemático también que Díaz Mirón la [modern poetry] inicie, oponiéndose a sí mismo.”<sup>107</sup> An initiation, rather than a birth. For Cuesta, Díaz Mirón was the first national poet to oppose romanticism and to practice an “artificial rigor,” the sacrificial “specification of functions,” in his own poetry. His poetry was a negative beginning – the rigor of its self-sacrifice was everything it had to teach. Thus, for Cuesta *Lascas*, Díaz Mirón’s last book of verse (after whose publication in 1901 Díaz Mirón remained silent until his death in 1928), marked a poetic beginning as an “opportunity” that refused to be taken or fulfilled: “...su actividad poética no parece expresar sino una imaginación de cómo debería ser una oportunidad que se conserva futura para siempre...”<sup>108</sup> It was also, crucially, a *subject-less* beginning. “El sujeto carece por sí mismo de importancia,” that was, for Cuesta, Díaz Mirón’s greatest poetic lesson.

It is wrong, hence, to consider Díaz Mirón as the model for Cuesta’s classicism.<sup>110</sup> The relation between Díaz Mirón and Cuesta’s utopia of Mexican classicism was clearly stated in a text from 1940, which Cuesta titled “Salvador Díaz Mirón.” Here, Cuesta discussed the break *Lascas* meant in Díaz Mirón’s poetic trajectory:

En apariencia, se distingue de la poesía anterior de Díaz Mirón por el culto de una cierta perfección literaria. El gusto por las descripciones, las rupturas del discurso, el rebuscamiento del lenguaje, parecen no tener otro objeto que la propiedad y la pureza de la forma ni otro origen que la satisfacción de un gusto <<clásico>>, recomendado por el ejemplo formalista de los <<parnasianos>>. Y así sería, si tuviera una satisfacción como

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<sup>107</sup> Cuesta, “Notas,” 95.

<sup>108</sup> Cuesta, “Salvador Díaz Mirón,” 494.

<sup>110</sup> “A estas alturas de la argumentación poco queda de ‘romántico’ en Díaz Mirón. Cuesta lo transforma en un romántico a su gusto, es decir, en un clasicista.” Domínguez Michael, “La crítica del demonio,” 315.

consecuencia. En ella veríamos el fin del esfuerzo. El premio del castigo, el fruto del sacrificio y de la pena. Pero no sería posible que nos mantuviéramos con esta opinión.<sup>111</sup>

Cuesta deposed Reyes from the position of the *Contemporáneos*' poetic father because of his "classic ambition" had sought a direct, non-perverted satisfaction that avoided the sacrificial moments of negation, "reduction" and "interruption." In the previous passage, Díaz Mirón's *Lascas* is first described as the apparent "satisfaction of a classic appetite," a moment later to be revealed as mere appetite: a desire for the classic that finds no "satisfaction," no "end to effort," no "reward for its discipline," no "fruit for its sacrifice and sorrow." *Lascas* was the pure appetite itself, existing through a deviation in its path towards the classic object, which could only be possessed indirectly ("...una estratagema para engañarla y sorprenderla!").

In "Salvador Díaz Mirón," Cuesta told at length the story of a negative beginning, how Díaz Mirón inaugurated modern Mexican poetry "oponiéndose a sí mismo." Before *Lascas*, Díaz Mirón's poetry was characterized by its "inspiración romántica pura," his poems "se ostentan con un verbo fácil y grandilocuente, cuya ductilidad aprovecha una pasión impetuosa y sin continencia."<sup>112</sup> Indeed, as Cuesta describes it, Díaz Mirón's *natural* attribute were facile oratory and grandiloquence:

Y que esta manera le era natural lo comprueban quienes estuvieron presentes en estas conversaciones que pasaron a la historia anecdótica de la literatura mexicana y en que Díaz Mirón abusaba de sus interlocutores hacienda gala sin fin de una palabra fluida, excesiva y arrebatada, que se aplicaba más a contemplarse a sí misma que a servir a sus indiferentes objetos y que, según parece, ni en las postrimerías de su vida perdió ninguna ocasión de destacarse a favor del más peregrino motivo.<sup>113</sup>

Díaz Mirón's *natural* romanticism implied a complex array of meanings: it was an oratory, conversational "abuse" based on a "furious" (*arrebatada*) and "excessive" wording; its ultimate

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<sup>111</sup> Cuesta, "Salvador Díaz Mirón," 499-500.

<sup>112</sup> Cuesta, "Salvador Díaz Mirón," 499.

<sup>113</sup> Cuesta, "Salvador Díaz Mirón," 499.

satisfaction is to contemplate itself rather than “serve an indifferent object.” This romanticism was, as Cuesta soon reveals, nothing but 19<sup>th</sup>-century “public eloquence.” After *Lascas*’ publication, Díaz Mirón returned “a la pista de la política, también un tributo a la pasión de la elocuencia pública posterior al arrepentimiento de que *Lascas* da fe” and thus offered “un nuevo testimonio de sus verdaderas inclinaciones naturales.”<sup>114</sup> If Díaz Mirón finally succumbed to his own natural inclinations, this only makes *Lascas*’ effort appear all the more heroic, and its achievement purer.

For Cuesta, *Lascas* “opposed” Díaz Mirón’s romantic inclinations - the power of public eloquence which contemplates its own self rather than serving an indifferent object – by creating an interruption between the poem’s content and its form: “...la diferencia tan honda que existe entre las formas y los asuntos de los poemas que entran en el libro...” ; “[l]a indiferencia con que parecen elegidos y tratados los asuntos de los poemas de *Lascas* resulta también ofensiva para el lector...”<sup>115</sup> The poetic distance between content and form interrupted “[l]a palabra fluida, excesiva y arrebatada.” But the indifference between content and form was not a fact predetermined in the abstract; it was consummated through poetry itself. For Cuesta, *Lascas* told of a passion between “content” and “form” that resulted in their final parting. It was a *consummation* in the reverse: not a wedding but a wake. (Only a few months before, Cuesta had written a review of *Muerte sin fin* where he defined Gorostiza’s poem as “los amores de la forma y de la materia”). The result of this negative consummation was, for Cuesta, the formulation of a specific “criterio artístico” for the first time in Mexican poetry.

Indeed, in “Salvador Díaz Mirón” Cuesta imagined the relations between classicism, romanticism and *preciosismo* as a long, complicated love affair between content and form. Thus,

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<sup>114</sup> Cuesta, “Salvador Díaz Mirón,” 499.

<sup>115</sup> Cuesta, “Salvador Díaz Mirón,” 496. See also Inés Arredondo’s excellent chapter “Forma es Fondo,” in *Acercamiento*, 292-318.



the classic is defined by Cuesta as nothing but a conventional agreement between form and content: “En la poesía clásica, la correspondencia entre la forma y el fondo es una ley genérica, que no pasa de ser una convención literaria. Hay una forma elegíaca como hay una forma idílica, y no son los asuntos quienes las distinguen, sino los sentimientos.”<sup>116</sup> As can be seen, the classic does not reveal a *necessary* accord between content and form, but only a kind of poetical *sensus communis*: the functions of poetry are defined by a social contract and consensus (perhaps the situation that precedes modern fragmentation). Against classic convention, romanticism reacted by declaring “la necesidad del asunto,” that is, the fact that each content should organically produce its own form: “La forma como individualidad es una concepción de la poesía romántica [...] Cada paisaje, cada crepúsculo, cada historia se dio a buscar su lenguaje individual, como si fueran a hablarse por sí mismos.”<sup>117</sup> Thus, in the romantic ideal “parecía ser que los asuntos poetizaran por sí mismo, sin intervención de los poetas, sin el intermedio de las formas.”<sup>118</sup> But this apparent liberation was in reality a symptom of the subject’s appetite to devour its poetic object and become one with it. By imaginarily removing itself from the poem (imaginarily since it avoids the sacrifice of the specification of functions realized through poetic praxis), what the subject does is to deliver its own voice as the false voice of its object. In “El clasisismo mexicano” (1934), Cuesta celebrated Manuel José Othón and Salvador Díaz Mirón for “resistirse a considerar románticamente el paisaje, es decir, animándolo con los movimientos sentimentales del espectador.”<sup>119</sup> This is why Cuesta considers Latin-American *modernismo* as a continuation rather than as a break with romanticism (an idea that causes Domínguez Michael much scandal). *Modernismo* did not stop at the landscape, but granted everything (statues, vases, portraits, coins, animals, the sun, the moon,

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<sup>116</sup> Cuesta, “Salvador Díaz Mirón,” 496.

<sup>117</sup> Cuesta, “Salvador Díaz Mirón,” 497.

<sup>118</sup> Cuesta, “Salvador Díaz Mirón,” 497.

<sup>119</sup> Cuesta, “El clasisismo mexicano,” 263.

and a long etc.) with a human voice, a language that contemplates its own self rather than its indifferent object. Against both romanticism and modernism, *preciosismo* implied the poet's intervention – a coming (*venire*) between (*inter*).

Díaz Mirón's "rebeldía" against romanticism acquired the form of an intervention and intermission. On the one hand, the poems in *Lascas* still lusted after the false consummation of "la necesidad del asunto." Cuesta quotes two verses from the poem "Ecce homo:" "A la verdad ajusto – el calculado gusto."<sup>120</sup> But Cuesta also finds poems – he quotes from "Epístola joco-seria" – where such a "fe estética" is qualified: "Que la veste resulte ceñida – al rigor de la estrecha medida -, aunque muestre, por gala o decoro, opulencias de raso y de oro."<sup>121</sup> That is, Cuesta finds in *Lascas* a resistance to its own will to romantically identify the real object and the subject's desire. Not only that, this resistance is not a quality of the poems, but of the object itself:

Si la anécdota llega a ser necesaria para la forma, esto es, para el sentimiento poético, se convierte en parte de la forma, se transforma en un instrumento de la poesía. De este perdonable pecado se guarda Díaz Mirón. La anécdota, para él, es una diosa respetable por sí misma, y a la que hay que adorar; ella es la verdad a la que el gusto, no tan calculado como lo pretende, debe ajustarse. Sin embargo, Díaz Mirón sabe perfectamente que esta pleitesía religiosa no es agradecida por la belleza.<sup>122</sup>

Thus, *preciosismo* tells the story of a "decepción" (disappointment, but also disillusion) between content and form.<sup>123</sup> Lustful after the possession of the real, desirous of contemplating itself by devouring its object, Díaz Mirón discovers that his passion is not returned, that the real does not give itself to him, *does not love him back*: "Y de aquí la angustia, la distancia entre los dos sentimientos; de aquí la falta de conexión entre la forma y el fondo, a pesar de la necesidad

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<sup>120</sup> Cuesta, "Salvador Díaz Mirón," 497.

<sup>121</sup> Cuesta, "Salvador Díaz Mirón," 497.

<sup>122</sup> Cuesta, "Salvador Díaz Mirón," 498.

<sup>123</sup> "Decepción" was one of Cuesta's favorite terms to define modern art. Previously, we saw that Agustín Lazo's paintings "decepcionan nuestro asalto." And, in the 1932 nationalist polemic, Cuesta famously wrote: "Es maravilloso cómo Pellicer decepciona a *nuestro paisaje*, cómo Ortiz de Montellano decepciona a *nuestro folklore*; cómo Salvador Novo decepciona a *nuestras costumbres*; cómo Xavier Villaurrutia decepciona a *nuestra literatura*."

supuesta; de aquí la perplejidad.”<sup>124</sup> In this sense, Díaz Mirón’s poems are not the false consummation between content and form, but rather a space where content exists only as “un lastre, una traba imprescindible.”<sup>125</sup> That is, as the real’s resistance to the romantic passion to devour. *Lascas* therefore enacts “una tortura desafortunada y necesaria” between content and form, each poem the object of “la desesperación de una impotencia, el rencor de un Luzbel. Son la obra de un sentimiento satánico, que carece tanto de reposo como de felicidad.”<sup>126</sup>

For Cuesta, Díaz Mirón was the first to introduce a specific “criterio artístico” into Mexican poetry by becoming conscious of the void (“el vasto y fiero abismo,” to quote Díaz Mirón himself) produced in poetic language by the resistance of the real; that is, the “tortura desafortunada y necesaria” between content and form. In other words, a specific artistic criterion emerges against poetry’s “paternal magisterial” function, not by repressing the poems content, nor by becoming vacuous formalism, but by turning poetry’s content into an unreachable object of desire. Form is, thus, an “intermission,” a distance – the tortured eros of unsatisfied passion, rather than the false consummation between subject and object. Against the passion of eloquence and the word that contemplates its own self, Díaz Mirón discovers that “la belleza le huye de la intención de la expresión, del sentimiento, y que es en los desvíos, en las vueltas de la expresión donde la encuentra como una gracia.”<sup>127</sup> The poet is no longer a teacher or a master – beauty runs away from the active intention to produce it, happens *in spite* of the poet rather thanks to him or her: “La sensibilidad de *Lascas* carece de impulsos; está desarmada y resignada a no recibir sino un gozo

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<sup>124</sup> Cuesta, “Salvador Díaz Mirón,” 498.

<sup>125</sup> Cuesta, “Salvador Díaz Mirón,” 498.

<sup>126</sup> Cuesta, “Salvador Díaz Mirón,” 500.

<sup>127</sup> Cuesta, “Salvador Díaz Mirón,” 501.

fortuito, que no se deja aprehender por un movimiento directo y que se da de un modo inoportuno, en medio de la pasión que no lo persigue.”<sup>128</sup>

Indeed, the specification of functions Cuesta attributes to Díaz Mirón’s poetry can be defined as the inversion of the romantic eloquence that contemplates its own self: a reverse made of interruptions, gaps, distances and silences which belied the illusion of a coherent poetic subject that speaks: “...el arte deja de ser un verbo para convertirse en un oído aislado, desprendido [...] con más avidez por el silencio que por la voz.”<sup>129</sup> Silence marked the limit for the specification of functions – the functionalization of silence was the utmost modern poetry could aspire to: “Y la poesía dictada por ellos es una expectación, una espera, un sumergimiento en la obscuridad que rodea a los contornos de las cosas y en el silencio que envuelve como un halo a las palabras.”<sup>130</sup> Against the magisterial voice that sustains presence, the specification of poetic functions thus pointed to a break between words and their subjects. In an essay on French poetry – “La poesía francesa,” written a year before “Salvador Díaz Mirón” -- Cuesta said: “Y un mundo puramente poético es aquel en que reina sin restricción la palabra y no la cosa, el nombre y no la substancia. Es aquel en que toda cosa es una imagen y toda substancia es un eco, y en donde lo único que tiene una realidad sensible es la palabra.”<sup>131</sup> The specification of functions Cuesta attributes to Díaz Mirón is nothing more than the break between words and substances, out of which emerges a new object, a new reality, “[la] realidad sensible de la palabra.”

In sum, the specification of poetic functions was, for Cuesta, akin to an “aesthetic crime.” It was the realization that “el sujeto carece por sí mismo de importancia.” The ultimate implication

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<sup>128</sup> Cuesta, “Salvador Díaz Mirón,” 501.

<sup>129</sup> Cuesta, “Salvador Díaz Mirón,” 501.

<sup>130</sup> Cuesta, “Salvador Díaz Mirón,” 501.

<sup>131</sup> Cuesta, “La poesía francesa,” 476.

of the void between the poem's content and its form is the disappearance of the poet as an agent, an active force which shapes, *gives form*. Salvador Díaz Mirón marked the beginning of Cuesta's sacrificial history of Mexican poetry, and thus Díaz Mirón represented a subject-less beginning, almost accidental: "Su reacción en contra del romanticismo carece de intención literaria [...] La presta, con la mayor ingenuidad, como una pura experiencia sensible, como algo que le hubiera fatalmente acontecido, sin que hubiera sido un objeto de su voluntad."<sup>132</sup> For Cuesta, modern Mexican poetry did not begin with an intention, a deliberate act, an audacious effort to take hold of the classic. It began with Díaz Mirón's perplexity before a real object that did not give itself to him, that did not love him back - a real object precisely because it refused to take the form of our desire, its reality being nothing else than "un lastre, una traba." As a negative beginning, it was a call neither to identification nor to repetition, but to rigorous attention, a wakefulness without rest. The last words in "Salvador Díaz Mirón" could have been written by Simone Weil or María Zambrano: "[Poetry] es crear una libertad de los sentidos, en medio de la asfixia y el sufrimiento. Y conservar el apetito al acecho, en una vigilia aguda y sin descanso, para hacerlo saltar sobre su presa sobrenatural y maravillosa, en el raro e inigualado instante en que el desorden del alma la pone al descubierto."

#### *V. Concluding Unscientific Postscript: Longing for the Market*

Cuesta's sacrificial history of modern Mexican poetry resulted, I have suggested, from a specific social situation; namely, from the imbalance between the *Contemporáneos'* longing for specialization and their actual professional lives as part of the growing cultural bureaucracy of a post-revolutionary state in the making. Whereas they rejected the "paternal magistry" of poetry

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<sup>132</sup> Cuesta, "Salvador Díaz Mirón, 501.

and the arts, they nevertheless depended on different forms of *mecenazgo* in order to undertake their cultural endeavors. They did not follow the Ateneo's messianic call and withdrew from the figure of the poet or philosopher as the nation's *maestro*. And yet, they found no market where their poetic practice could sustain their middle-class existence. This was especially true for poetry, in particular modern poetry; music and painting had been able to take advantage of "el rápido crecimiento en la demanda foránea de productos característicos," to use Guillermo Sheridan's description of the 1930's.<sup>133</sup> Diego Rivera or Carlos Chávez had no problems in making a handsome living with national and foreign commissions. Thus, there was a kind of candid simplicity, almost an honesty, to many of the accusations leveled against *Contemporáneos* in 1932: at least we know who feeds us and don't pretend otherwise! they accusing voices seemed to say.

With his usual perspicacity, José Joaquín Blanco has identified the longing for a developed literary market in the works of different members of *Contemporáneos*. Blanco quotes from Gorostiza's "Hacia una literatura mediocre" (1931): "He tratado inútilmente de recordar siquiera diez títulos de obras literarias publicadas en México durante 1930. No pude dar, desde luego, con uno solo de poesía [...] el total no debe pasar de la media docena, ni las ediciones de 300 a 500 ejemplares."<sup>134</sup> For Gorostiza, it was precisely this absence which produced *preciosismo*:

En estas condiciones, son pocos los que emprenden una labor literaria que requiere cierta aguda disposición del ánimo hacia el apostolado o el martirio; estos pocos escritores y ganapanes a un tiempo, producen necesariamente poco y este poco que producen no lo lee nadie, porque en el aislamiento, a sabiendas de que realiza un esfuerzo infructuoso, el escritor cae en la especulación o en el preciosismo y se pone fuera del alcance de un entendimiento común.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Sheridan, *México en 1932*, 82-83. It was an active exploitation on the part of national artist, rather than the passive submission to an external appetite: "...como sostiene Diego Rivera con frecuencia en sus cartas desde los Estados Unidos, a los yanquis era legítimo sacarles 'todo lo que se pueda'."

<sup>134</sup> José Joaquín Blanco, "Contemporáneos y el Estado (1920-1977)," in *Los Contemporáneos y su tiempo* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes), 94.

<sup>135</sup> Quoted from Blanco, "Contemporáneos y el Estado," 95.

Many years later, in 1959, Salvador Novo would reminisce about his old friends in a public conference, later published as “El trato con escritores.” He characterized their situation in the following manner:

una sociedad aún venturosamente analfabeta resiente la presencia parasitaria en ella de estos seres inútiles y, o bien les da una mala vida, o los exprime y explota forzándolos a aplicar sus morbosos talentos a tareas congeniales como redactor anuncios o artículos, o dar conferencias, o adaptar historias para el cine y la televisión, o les da un empleo en el gobierno.<sup>136</sup>

As Blanco points out, the *Contemporáneos* cultural production was crucially informed by this absence: “...en México no han existido las condiciones sociales que permiten el desenvolvimiento de la literatura; que una sociedad amplia necesite y propicie, permitiendo un mercado real y una atmósfera compartida, la existencia de autores y de libros.”<sup>137</sup> For Blanco, a leftist in the school of Monsiváis, the socialization of literary practice implies developing a strong book market, rather than emphasizing its humanist magistry.

This same longing can be found throughout Cuesta’s writings. Consider his very first published text, “La <<Santa Juana>> de Shaw” (1925). Cuesta was merely twenty-two, but the piece was already masterful criticism. And yet, as we find out only at its end, Cuesta did not watch a performance of Shaw’s *Saint Joan*, nor read it as a published book. He had read parts of Shaw’s piece, published in Ortega y Gasset’s *Revista de Occidente*. Cuesta’s text, thus, was the review of an absent object and an unsatisfied desire: “Pero de la simple lectura no podremos coger confiadamente sino la parte, pudiéramos decir, didáctica de la obra. En las ediciones de la *Revista de Occidente* acaba de aparecer su traducción; pero el deseo de verla representada aquí en México es de esos deseos condenados de nacimiento a vivir una vida insatisfecha.”<sup>138</sup> Consider also the

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<sup>136</sup> Quoted from Blanco, “Contemporáneos y el Estado,” 99.

<sup>137</sup> Blanco, “Contemporáneos y el Estado,” 101.

<sup>138</sup> Cuesta, “La ‘Santa Juana de Shaw,’” 69.

ironic delight which opens “En la Exposición de Arte Moderno:” “Una exposición de pintura es un hecho tan inusitado, que cuando nos sorprende una invitación para asistir a una, imaginarias dificultades nos asaltan.”<sup>139</sup> Finally, consider the *Contemporáneos*’ effort to launch new literary magazines and Cuesta’s pathetic statement after the condemnation of *Examen* for offenses against public morals in 1932:

*Examen* es un periódico cuya periodicidad está vinculada a la pobreza de sus colaboradores habituales. Tira hasta 1 000 ejemplares. No se vece ni se vende en las calles. Lo compran en las librerías trescientos heterodoxos, sobrerrealistas o vanguardistas, unos, y otros que nada más han estado en París.<sup>140</sup>

In a fundamental sense, Cuesta’s critical praxis tells the story of this “condemned desire,” what at another point he calls “el apetito social de la cultura:”

la cultura es por ella misma apetencia, que más que ninguna otra la sociedad está obligada a satisfacer, debido precisamente, a la superioridad de su valor respecto de los demás apetitos; debido, precisamente, a que su valor es por esencial social, a diferencia de los otros, que son esencialmente individuales. La cultura, desde el punto de vista individual, es un trabajo, un rigor, un sufrimiento; sólo para la sociedad es una satisfacción, un gozo, un usufructo.<sup>141</sup>

Indeed, Cuesta’s and the *Contemporáneos* practiced culture as “work, rigor and suffering.” But the “joy” and “profit” produced through individual negation found no social satisfaction: neither consumers nor a market to stimulate production.

We should be wary, then, of triumphalist proclamations of Cuesta and the *Contemporáneos* as the realizers of Mexican literary “autonomy” or as the founders of the “literary field.” Here I

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<sup>139</sup> Cuesta, “En la Exposición de Arte Moderno,” 73.

<sup>140</sup> Cuesta, “La consignación de <<Examen>>,” 163. After the dissolution of *Contemporáneos* literary magazine, the group launched *Examen*, directed by Cuesta, which only lasted three issues (1932). Its last issue was devastatingly attacked because it published extracts from Rubén Salazar Mallén’s novel, *Cariátide*. The piece was considered by communists a mocking of party members; and, by “las buenas conciencias” and the mainstream media (*Excelsior*), an attack on public morals, for Salazar Mallén’s was the first published piece which transcribed all sorts of working-class obscenities. The best account of the *Contemporáneos* efforts to publish literary magazines is found in Sheridan, *Los Contemporáneos ayer*.

<sup>141</sup> Cuesta, “La autonomía de la Universidad,” 209-210.



have argued that Cuesta and the *Contemporáneos* indeed felt the pressure of specialization in the field of cultural production, but registered it precisely as a truncated process, as the distance between a specialized praxis and a *profession*. Thus, I have avoided the term “autonomy” in relation to their work. Of course, the autonomy of any practice is always relative. But in regard to the “relative autonomy” of poetry, the *Contemporáneos* placed a much greater emphasis on the first term (relative) rather than on the second (autonomy). To be sure, they sought an autonomous practice, but they could only realize it as a radical negation. This is but another way of saying that the “autonomy” of literary practice is as much a discursive feat as it is the result of developing modern social institutions, such as a national literary market and a reading public. In this sense, to consider Cuesta and the *Contemporáneos* as the foundation of literary autonomy is to suppress their actual position in Mexican literary history, caged between pedagogy and the lack of a market – it is to consider that “autonomy” is won mystically, by desiring and proclaiming it. What Cuesta and the *Contemporáneos* offer to present-day writers, readers, and scholars is neither their “moral” triumph nor the “purity” of their poetry. It is actually the contrary - the *impurity* of their practice, their ambiguous place between bureaucracy, the arts and the market, as well as the moral and professional compromises they unashamedly undertook in order to write good poetry.

## Conclusion

“Aesthetics Matters,” as it were, has told a story of mutilation and redemption in three acts. In the first act, we witnessed the birth of our protagonist, the “aesthetic subject,” out of the modern division of knowledge and labor. The second act launched our protagonist (along with its doppelgänger, the mutilated man, forever at its side) into the world in search for its own language, a language that could voice the plenitude of its being. And yet, instead of finding such a language, it discovered the world – the harsh realities of history and social struggle. The final act, thus, staged mutilation and redemption as one and the same thing. Incapable of becoming a whole, the ‘aesthetic’ subject mutilates itself so as to adapt and express modern fragmentation, so as to become modern, for by giving up the whole, the mutilated subject gained an object of infinite desire, the space for the free play of language and desire which it had been looking for all along. “Aesthetic Matters” has shown that the scenario of the “aesthetic subject’s” drama of mutilation and renewal was the gradual establishment of modern systems of national education, developed in Spanish America during the last three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century and the first four of the 20<sup>th</sup>.<sup>1</sup>

In the first moment of my narration, then, I provided a reading of José Enrique Rodó’s *Ariel* which sought to overcome conventional academic understanding of the text, which has highlighted the ‘idealism’ or the ‘aristocratic’ nature of *Ariel*. Thus, in the first chapter I read Prospero’s lecture, as it were, as a political economy of national culture, with its own forms of capital (youth and leisure time) and waste (the fragmentation of faculties, the weakening of the general interest). The odd “merchandise” produced by this political economy of national culture was precisely the

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<sup>1</sup> To be sure, future revision of these ideas will offer a more nuanced panorama of education as local and cosmopolitan building, showing, for instance, the difference between lasting successful projects of public education in Montevideo and Buenos Aires (from the 1880s to the 1920s), and Mexico’s late arrival to the modern educational revolution in postrevolutionary times.

‘aesthetic’ subject, whose goal was ‘universal’ recognition and cultural prestige. For Próspero, the social factories of such a subject were national schools. Only there could the formless masses be shaped; only there a collective existence, national and international, could be achieved.

Furthermore, I have argued that Próspero’s lecture explicitly systematized the links between this specific notion of culture and the development of national industry; between *Ariel*’s political economy of culture and plain capitalist political economy. For Próspero, the relation was mediated by the possession of a specific kind of capital: leisure time. Thus, he conceived leisure time as a kind of *surplus* derived from economic activities which could, nonetheless, be invested in the realm of culture. It could be turned into *literary* writing. This particular economy, thus, revolved around youth as capital, leisure time as surplus, the “aesthetic subject” and literary language as products, and national schools as production site. I understand *arielismo* as a specific expression of this economy, and economy which gives coherence to the branch of Spanish American cultural politics informed by Próspero’s lecture, which flourished during the first four decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century.

In the second moment of my narration, I explored the ways in which two Mexican *arielistas* – Alfonso Reyes and José Vasconcelos – addressed the conundrums posed by Rodó’s *Ariel*. In the second chapter of this dissertation, I argued that in *Cuestiones estéticas* young Alfonso Reyes both reinstated and modified Próspero’s lecture by turning it into a humanist dialogue. The first consequence of this dialogic doubling was a deeper, more extensive consideration of the communication between students and master (*maestro*). For the young Reyes, the student/master link constituted essentially a linguistic drama, a question of poetics. Through the humanist dialogue between Castro and Valdés, Reyes explored the tensions between scholarly language and literary language – their actual differences and the possibility of an uneasy alliance.

For Reyes, the making of subjects at national schools came down to the kind of language distributed amongst students. The background to his humanist dialogue, I suggest, are Reyes's student years at the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, structured around a lasting positivist curricula. Against the specialized languages of both science and the liberal professions, Reyes conceived the *literary* as a general, non-specialized language, whose pedagogical strength derived from its capability to express the *wholly* human. Like Rodó, young Reyes conceived literary language as the result of a certain *surplus* – he imagined humanism as domestic harmony, where the father's voice spoke a distinction between work and culture, and where domestic labour guaranteed the poet's vision.

In the search for the 'aesthetic' subject, Reyes resorted to dialogue, Vasconcelos to autobiography. The years that went from *Cuestiones estéticas* (1911) to *Ulises Criollo* (1935) might explain the distance between dialogue and monologue. To whom could Vasconcelos speak after his unsuccessful run for the presidency in 1929? But in writing his memoirs, Vasconcelos articulated both a testimony and a harsh critique of *arielismo's* humanist utopia. His talking about himself was a talking about that other that always lurks behind deep-rooted social conceptions. For, having lived and studied as a child in Eagle Pass, Texas, Vasconcelos had firsthand experience of the struggle for cultural prestige inside the classroom – and across the lasting civilizational divide so dear to *Ariel* (the Anglo vs. the Latin).

On the one hand, then, Prospero's promise of aesthetic utopia – the concert of collective existence – thoroughly informed Vasconcelos's narration of his own life. A punctual encounter with Dante's *Divine Comedy*, during his university years, served as example of the arts' capability to seduce and inform – to transform – subjects. On the other, Vasconcelos wrote full of deep disappointment. As I argue in the third chapter, in his memoirs Vasconcelos conceived Mexican

political and cultural history, from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century to the aftermath of the Revolution, as a vast progression of human *waste*. Vasconcelos's description of a Mexican wasteland attested the failure of his humanist project, which at bottom was an attempt to create an enlightened civil class that could displace the military in power.

In Mexico, Vasconcelos and Reyes were crucial figures in the development of both modern literature and modern institutions of national education. Thus, they enacted the alliance between literature and education invoked by Próspero in Rodó's *Ariel*. They not only implemented a humanist, literary notion of educational institutions – their literary works were determined by this pedagogical bent. In last moment of my narration, I examine the rupture of the alliance between literature and pedagogy I have called *arielismo*. In the 1920s and 1930s, a generation of younger Mexican poets, who defined themselves as the avant-garde, the *Contemporáneos*, challenged poetry's humanist magistracy, that is, they rejected poetry's old institutional task: producing synthetic subjects.

In the last chapter, I examined Jorge Cuesta's critical works in order to understand the divorce between poetry and national education. Cuesta was the *Contemporáneos'* intellectual and moral consciousness, the relatively unknown great thinker of his generation. It was not, of course, that in the 1930s national education ceased to use poetry pedagogically. It was actually poetry which moved on: what Cuesta and the *Contemporáneos* made historically clear was that, even if poetry could still be used in the educational system, the educational system could no longer be found in Mexican poetry. Cuesta's whole critical enterprise served this purpose. As I argue, his very language strove to distance the critic from the work of art, it rejected the pedagogical identification that nationalist artists and critics demanded. By denying identification, the work of art was free to emerge as an individual object, free from any specific identity. The poetic object,

hence, resembled for Cuesta the scientific (artificial) object of experimental sciences: a fragment of experience turned infinitely deep by the demonic passion to know. Thus, while my narrative began with the fear of the mutilated man in Rodó's *Ariel*, it ends with the embrace, by the critic and poet, of modern fragmentation. Paradoxically, only by abandoning the desire for wholeness could poetry and its subject be truly free.

By studying the work of these four intellectuals, I hope to have contributed to the following fronts in the study of Spanish American literature: first, I hope to have carried out a work of demystification. That is, at the most basic level I hope to have shown there is nothing esoteric, baffling, aloof, or masturbatory about aesthetics and aesthetic theory, neither in Europe nor in America. From its beginning, aesthetic theory was deeply committed to the radical transformation of social reality. Moreover, I would argue that many of aesthetics' more questionable points are related to this radical commitment, rather than to its supposed disinterest in social reality. Following a thread that begins with Schiller, I argue that aesthetic theory was intimately related to the development of modern, State-funded systems of national education in Spanish America – only in light of this relation aesthetics as a cultural pivot of passionate discussions makes true sense. For this work of demystification, I relied on concepts developed by previous Spanish American academic critics, especially Ángel Rama and Julio Ramos, a tradition I hope to have developed and advanced in some measure throughout my analysis.

Second, in so far as aesthetic theory can only be understood in relation to pedagogic institutions, I hope to have contributed an original perspective on the relations between literature and national systems of education in Spanish America. In other words, through an analysis of aesthetic theory, I sought to define the place of literature and literary studies inside national schools. For I consider aesthetic theory a fundamental moment in the history of literary studies

and literary criticism in Spanish America, a history that still informs all of us - academics, professors and critics - working on both sides of the (still alive) civilizational border. As I argued, this is above all the history of a certain language: the language *of* literature, but also the language for talking and discussing literature in an academic context. By re-examining and demystifying aesthetic theory, I hope to have shown that it is an essential part of our own professional history and that its study might help us understand our institutional present – specifically, the so-called crisis of the humanities, the place of literature in the contemporary university, and the ways our works in the classroom and in the library are, or are *not*, politically effective.

What is missing in this manuscript is painfully clear; the ways it may develop and move forward are less so. Immediately, two tasks are at hand. The first: a chapter on Pedro Henríquez Ureña's Mexican periods, 1906-1910 and 1921-1925. The literary result of the first period was *Horas de Estudio*, published in Paris in 1910 by the same house that would publish Reyes's *Cuestiones estéticas* just a year later. During the second period, Henríquez Ureña collaborated closely with Vasconcelos, Reyes, and other intellectuals such as Julio Torri, on several of the Ministry of Education's cultural projects. In 1925, just after arriving in Argentina, Henríquez Ureña *La utopía de América*, a collection of essays and conferences he had written during his second Mexican stay. The chapter on Henríquez Ureña would not only clarify his pedagogical and literary influence on both Reyes and Vasconcelos but would focus on Henríquez Ureña's relations with US academia. Indeed, since youth and throughout his life, Henríquez Ureña studied and later taught at different universities in the United States. How did the experience of American schools and universities affect Henríquez Ureña's understanding of literature and literary study? How did it affect his views on humanism and the professionalization of literature in Spanish America? These are some of the questions the chapter would try to address.

The second task at hand is a chapter on Gabriela Mistral's work as pedagogue during the 1920's. Indeed, one of this manuscript's biggest lacks is an exploration of the role women played in the *arielista* project of aesthetic education. I have tried to make up for this lack by reading the very homophilic (and homoerotic) world of *arielismo* through a gendered perspective. But this critique of *machista* culture is not enough. A positive evaluation of women's role during these years would include both an exploration of the symbolic connotations attributed to women (as spiritual mother) and the actual positions they occupied within pedagogic hierarchy (as *maestras* and, indeed, as the majority of the pedagogic working force).

Gabriela Mistral's figure presents a great opportunity to explore both issues. At the beginning of the 1920's, Mistral worked closely with Vasconcelos in order to advance the education of women in Mexico City. The result of these efforts was the creation of a school – Escuela Gabriela Mistral – and the creation of a literary anthology for the use of students: *Lecturas para mujeres* (1923). Mistral was in charge of selecting the texts that made up the anthology, and provided also a brief introduction, significantly titled “Palabras de la extranjera.” In her introduction, Mistral not only praised Vasconcelos's educational crusades and his continental spirit, but also subtly expressed the tensions she encountered in Mexico since her arrival, tensions related both to nationality and gender. By paying close attention to this brief prologue, and by exploring the logic behind her anthology's selection, I propose to read the tensions in *arielismo*'s desire for continental unity. Indeed, if Spanish America could be imagined as one big family, the position of women in this domestic structure can help us understand the forms of persuasion and violence which held the different members of the family together.



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