Huidobro’s Futurity: 21st-Century Approaches

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Huidobro’s Absolute Modernity/Futurity: An Introduction

Scott Weintraub and Luis Correa-Díaz

Il faut être absolument moderne
(One must be absolutely modern).
—Arthur Rimbaud, “Une saison en enfer” (1873)

Nothing gets old fast like the future.
—Lev Grossman

Rimbaud’s prophetic remark highlights the difficulties of situating literary and cultural modernity at a specific moment or place, since modernity in and of itself is constituted by, and as, multiple temporal disjunctions. Modernity structurally aims to erase a past that it nevertheless needs to structure its own departure, as Paul de Man suggests, “in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure” (148). At the same time, modernity’s disjunctions and breaks in fact make the relationship between literary innovation and historical modernity legible. De Man writes:

The continuous appeal of modernity, the desire to break out of literature toward the reality of the moment, prevails and, in its turn, folding back upon itself, engenders the repetition and the continuation of literature. Thus modernity, which is fundamentally a falling away from literature and a rejection of history, also acts as the principle that gives literature duration and historical existence. (162)

If modernity qua concept should dictate the conditions of possibility of the encounter between literature and history—as a dialectical force or pulsion not at all that different from what Octavio Paz described in the context of the Latin American avant-garde in terms of “the tradition of rupture”—then there is perhaps no better approach to Rimbaud’s notion of being “absolutely modern” than the critical and meta-critical project undertaken by the poetics and experimental aesthetics of Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro (1893–1948),

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one of the most influential writers in the Latin American avant-garde movements that lasted from approximately 1915 to the late-1930s. His work is certainly best known for its formal and visual poetic experimentation, and is often discussed in terms of his creacionista aesthetic that searched for an autonomous sphere of poetic reality that refused to imitate the natural world in its creative potential, as he stated in an early manifesto titled “La poesía,” read at the Ateneo in Madrid in 1921:

El poeta crea fuera del mundo que existe el que debiera existir. […] El poeta hace cambiar de vida a las cosas de la Naturaleza, saca con su red todo aquello que se mueve en el caos de lo innombrado, tiende hilos eléctricos entre las palabras y alumbrá de repente rincones desconocidos, y todo ese mundo estalla en fantasmas inesperados. El valor del lenguaje de la poesía está en razón directa de su alejamiento del lenguaje que se habla.

[… ] Toda poesía válida tiende al último límite de la imaginación. Y no sólo de la imaginación, sino del espíritu mismo, porque la poesía no es otra cosa que el último horizonte, que es, a su vez, la arista en donde los extremos se tocan, en donde no hay contradicción ni duda. Al llegar a ese lindero final el encadenamiento habitual de los fenómenos rompe su lógica, y al otro lado, en donde empiezan las tierras del poeta, la cadena se rehace en una lógica nueva. El poeta os tiende la mano para conduciros más allá del último horizonte, más arriba de la punta de la pirámide, en ese campo que se extiende más allá de lo verdadero y lo falso, más allá de la vida y de la muerte, más allá del espacio y del tiempo, más allá de la razón y la fantasía, más allá del espíritu y la materia.

(The poet creates the world that should exist outside of the world that does exist. […] The poet changes the life of things in Nature, removes with his net everything that moves in the chaos of the unnamed, stretches electric cables between words, suddenly illuminates unknown corners, and this entire world explodes in unanticipated ghosts. The value of poetic language is a direct result of its separation from spoken language.

[...] Poetry is a challenge to Reason, the only challenge that reason can accept, since one creates its reality in the world that IS and the other in the world that IS BECOMING.

[...] All true poetry reaches to the final limit of the imagination. And not only of the imagination, but of the spirit itself, because poetry is nothing other than the final horizon, which is, at the same time, the edge where extremes come into contact, where there is neither contradiction nor doubt. Upon arriving at this final border the usual linkage of phenomena breaks its logic, and on the other side, where the lands of the poet begin, the chain is remade with a new logic. The poet extends his hand to you to carry you beyond the final horizon, beyond the point of the pyramid, in that field that extends beyond truth and falsity,
A writer of poetry, novels, short stories, screenplays, essays, and manifestos, Huidobro’s work marks a series of important passages between the American and European avant-gardes in addition to a key moment in the development of the Chilean and Latin American poetic canon. Critical work on Huidobro’s literary production has focused on a number of specific issues: the varied linguistic elements of Huidobro’s poetry, the complex relationship between word and image in his caligramas and visual poetry, his multiple avant-gardist aesthetic projects, and the canonicity and originality of his writing. Noted critics such as Octavio Paz, René de Costa, Saúl Yurkievich, Guillermo Sucre, Cedomil Goic, George Yúdice, Ana Pizarro, Hugo Montes, Federico Schopf, Jorge Schwartz, and Jaime Concha, among others, have contributed to the sizable bibliography analyzing Huidobro’s work.² The present book’s approach, however, aims to engage, and subsequently respond to, the move from “absolute modernity” to an absolute futurity of Huidobro’s textual projects. Very much in the manner of Rimbaud, Huidobro’s writings are continually contemporary in an extreme and urgent sense, and they invite constant rereading and recontextualizations. But most importantly, the call emanating from Huidobro’s work is an urgent one, considered in light of Altazor’s repeated admonition that “there’s no time to lose” (in Canto IV of the eponymous poem). It beckons to a reader-to-come exploring new fields, while at the same time this reader must be sure to heed Huidobro’s warning: “El lector corriente no se da cuenta de que el mundo rebasa fuera del valor de las palabras, que queda siempre un más allá de la vista humana, un campo inmenso lejos de las fórmulas del tráfico diario” (655) (The common reader does not realize that the world goes beyond the value of words; there is always something beyond human vision, an immense field beyond the formulas of daily traffic).

The essays included here, then, follow this multifarious imperative by appealing to recent theoretical and methodological work done in the humanities and in the sciences—including, but not limited to, cultural and transatlantic studies, ecocriticism, quantum theory and cosmology, media studies, the visual arts, political theory, psychoanalysis, trauma theory, and deconstruction. Rather than conceive of this book as a response to any sort of “stagnancy” in the state of Huidobro’s criticism, we envision that the volume’s exploratory nature will open new lines of inquiry into Huidobro’s writing in the early twenty-first century. And while the central question of rereading Huidobro’s work is most often formulated in terms of an approach to poetics, these articles examine representative works from several genres. Additionally, we believe that the essays themselves call into question the
validity of these generic demarcations in the particularity of Huidobro’s continuously innovative writing project.

In terms of the specificity of the critical contributions to Huidobro’s studies that this book proposes, the first section, titled “Culturally Yours, Vicente Huidobro: Cultural Poetics and Politics,” explores how and to what extent Huidobro’s European travels form part of a diverse linguistic, literary, and cultural encounter between American and European (primarily avant-garde) poetics. Articles in this section examine the way in which the historicity of Huidobro’s poetic project qua avant-garde writing constitutes a unique cultural recontextualization of transatlantic literary, cultural, and political ideological constructs. These critical operations reconsider Huidobro’s body of work by interrogating the material nature of the work of art in the larger milieu of avant-garde formalisms, as well as social and aesthetic ideology. Additionally, essays included in this section dislodge and resituate Huidobro’s place in a global/historical context by way of literary and cultural filiations (or disjunctions) between his work and the historical moment of the avant-garde.

The first piece included in this section, “Huidobro’s Transatlantic Politics of Solidarity and the Poetics of the Spanish Civil War,” by Cecilia Enjuto Rangel, explores Huidobro’s poems, political manifestos, interviews, and letters in support of the Spanish Republic during the Civil War (1936–1939). She situates the Chilean writer’s contribution to transnational solidarity in the context of the larger avant-garde period by emphasizing the central role that race and tradition play in several under-studied texts by Huidobro, and also compares the tenor of Huidobro’s writing to the so-called “committed” art of several notable Latin American and Spanish poets who supported the Republican cause. Her analysis culminates in a close reading of the haunting elegy “España” (1937), in which Huidobro’s verse bears witness to the fragmentation and destruction of a previously glorious nation, while at the same time it recuperates the problematic blood ties between Latin America and its (colonial) Spanish forefathers in order to strengthen the bonds within the Spanish-speaking world.

Rosa Sarabia’s contribution, entitled “Vicente Huidobro’s Salle 14: In Pursuit of the Autonomy of the Object,” on the other hand, turns to the issue of cultural politics and the work of art via a reading of the 1922 exhibit of thirteen “painted poems” by Vicente Huidobro, billed as Salle XIV. Her article presents a nuanced analysis of the painted poems—especially “Minuit”—in terms of the materiality, the originality, and the autonomy of the artistic object. She goes on to consider the works’ reinscription in the contemporary, postmodern art scene via an exhibition titled Vicente Huidobro y las artes plásticas that took place at the Reina Sofía Art Center in Madrid, Spain, in 2001. Sarabia argues, following cultural critic Eduardo Grüner, that the commodification of the work of art is in fact the condition
of possibility of its autonomy, made possible, in the case of Vicente Huidobro y las artes plásticas, through patronage from Telefónica S.A. This demonstrates, according to Sarabia’s reading of the exhibition, the way in which expositions such as the reincarnation of Salle XIV are commodified and regulated by the larger industrialization of culture, as Néstor García Canclini has argued in other contexts.

Greg Dawes’ “Altazor and Huidobro’s ‘Aesthetic Individualism,’” marks a return to/of the political in our projections of Huidobro’s ‘Futurity,’ a current that emerges from the very depths of a work—Altazor (1919–1931)—that has been read as the culmination and death throes of the aesthetic experimentation that characterized much of the work of the global avant-gardes. Dawes argues, in fact, that Altazor in and of itself can be read as the apotheosis of anarchist political aesthetics, insofar as it displaces the political radicalism of anarchism and instead brings out the centrality of Huidobro’s left-leaning libertarianism to his larger poetic system. By way of Dawes’ careful reading of Altazor qua poetic-political manifesto, we might argue that Huidobro’s avant-garde aesthetics can be thought of as the other of anarchism, in such a way as to cast the triumph of radical individualism as the point of intersection between art and civic/political life.

The second group of essays, collectively subsumed under the title “Huidobro: (Dis)Embodied, Quantized, Musically Inclined, and Au Naturel,” interrogates the myriad astronomical, biopolitical, musical, and ecocritical features of Huidobro’s poetics and textual production. These articles take to task the cosmological, naturalistic, melodic, and corporeal notions that both literally and tropologically structure Huidobro’s poetics, in order to stress the insistent, even urgent resonance of Huidobro’s work in and beyond current theoretical and critical contexts within Hispanism and literary studies.

In “Altazor: A New Arrangement,” Bruce Dean Willis examines Huidobro’s continual reshuffling of linguistic, musical, and corporeal elements in the long poem’s dialectic of creation and destruction. For Willis, the tropes of physical decomposition that accompany Altazor’s progressive, material breakdown of words demonstrate the poem’s failure (insofar as escape from language is impossible), but end up reinforcing the creative potential brought about by Altazor’s final sonorous silence at the end of Canto VII. In other words, Willis’ close reading of Altazor’s rearrangement and mixing of linguistic and musical interludes carries out a series of structural, tonal, and alchemistic transformations that succeeds in destroying in such a way as to unleash the Lazarus-like rebirth of poetry in the midst of the death of meaning.

Moving from Huidobro’s synechdotal explorations in Altazor to the ecocritical features of his creacionista aesthetic, the next article, Christopher M. Travis’ “Huidobro’s Rose: The Environmental Dialectics of
Creacionismo," takes to task the way in which Huidobro challenges the objectification of nature as aesthetic fetish, and subsequently engages in a more active dialogue with the non-human world. Travis first develops Huidobro’s proposal that the poet must not obey the traditional hierarchy that would place God/Nature over humankind, as evidenced, in particular, in manifestos like “Non Serviam” and the famous poem “Arte poética.” By way of subsequent close readings of several texts that span the trajectory of Huidobro’s poetic career—moving from early modernista-inspired verse to the apotheosis of his creacionista project that is Altazor—Travis brings out the kind of acknowledgement of nature inherent in Huidobro’s search for, loss of, and renewed search for meaning by reevaluating the Chilean poet’s textual and humanist explorations through an ecocritical lens.

The final piece in this section, Scott Weintraub’s “Cosmic Impacts and Quantum Uncertainties: Altazor and the Fall ‘From’ Reference,” reconsiders the impact of a series of linguistic, critical, allegorical, and gravitational “falls” in the trajectory of the falling Altazor’s “voyage in parachute.” Here, Weintraub stresses the relevance of a linguistic event in the poem’s gravitational field by first discussing myriad critical approaches to the issue of the poem’s “illegible,” ambiguous conclusion. He contextualizes this fall from the linguistic and conceptual referent in Altazor by providing a necessary examination of the scientific imaginary that the poem shares with important discoveries in theoretical and experimental physics in the first few decades of the twentieth century. By engaging the historical context of the quantum/relativistic paradigm shift in physics that was contemporary to the poem’s composition, Weintraub explores the ways in which Altazor in and of itself demarks the historical and discursive passage between Newtonian and quantum cosmovisions. Altazor’s meaning-making activities, read with respect to quantum and cosmological concerns, show how Huidobro’s long poem traces out the falling motion of a linguistic and cosmic event that, nevertheless, is horizon-less and radically heterogeneous in nature—a facet of the poem that is indicative of the kinds of quantum fluctuations whose “path” cannot be accurately predicted or described with total certainty or mastery.

The third and final section of articles, grouped under the rubric of “Huidobro and the Others: Comparative Poetics,” explores Huidobro’s futurity in terms of the impact of his writing project on future poets and poetic environments. In particular, these essays focus on the indelible footprints left by Huidobro on the poetic corpus of more recent Chilean poets Nicanor Parra and Juan Luis Martínez, and explore several under-appreciated North-South (and South-North) currents linking the Latin American avant-gardists and subsequent North American poetic production.

In “Huidobro and Parra: World-Class Antipoets,” Dave Oliphant explores the ways in which Nicanor Parra’s “Also Sprach Altazor” openly
pays homage to Huidobro’s groundbreaking “antipoetic” textual production, while Parra at the same time satirizes the underdevelopment of a Huidobro-like irreverent streak in the Chilean poetic canon. Oliphant reads Parra reading Huidobro via the antipoetic “disciple’s” comic twists on numerous topics such as historical literary rivalries, shipwrecks, coffins, and Huidobro’s abandonment of communism, among several others, throughout the eighty-four section poem “Also Sprach Altazor,” published in Discursos de sobremesa (2006), and also accounts for Parra’s ironic commentaries in earlier books like Poemas y antipoemas (1954) and Versos de salón (1962). According to Oliphant, then, “Also Sprach Altazor” returns to and departs from the master’s ur-text in such a way as to permit Parra to riff on Huidobro’s foundational, creacionista poetics in a playful manner, one that can certainly be read as informing Parra’s own mock-heroic and irreverent poetic system. Oscar D. Sarmiento, in “Intersecting Reflections: Huidobro Through Juan Luis Martínez’s La nueva novela,” revisits Vicente Huidobro’s literary and visual corpus through a number of key moments in Juan Luis Martínez’s seminal art object/poetic collage ironically titled The New Novel (1977). By carefully interrogating the impact of Huidobro’s creacionista project on Martínez’s complex weaving of citations and contradictions, Sarmiento reflects on the textual potentialities of both poets’ use of humor and irony, visual representations of reality, the context of performance and performativity in the avant-garde encounter, as well as the return of the political amidst a radical, textual aesthetics.

The next essay maintains the guiding thread of comparative poetics, but deviates slightly towards the practice and politics of literary translation. Fernando Pérez Villalón, in “Huidobro/Pound: Translating Modernism,” traces the paths of Vicente Huidobro and Ezra Pound’s physical and linguistic displacements via travel as well as translation, highlighting the tension between mother tongue and other languages in their work and also engaging the otherness of language itself in poetry written by Huidobro and Pound. He reevaluates each poet’s self-insertion into the context of European modernism in light of the role that translation played in the composition and the reception of their works, and further explores each poet’s own theoretical reflections on the (un)translatability of poetry and its cultural ramifications.

The focus of the book’s final article, Cedomil Goic’s “Poèmes Paris 1925, Vicente Huidobro and Joaquín Torres García: Visual Image and Poetic Writing,” centers on Uruguayan painter Joaquín Torres García’s original rewriting of Huidobro’s book Tout à coup in Poèmes Paris 1925, in which the painter intersperses the poems with symbolic drawings. Goic analyzes the ways in which the encounter between visual imagery and poetic writing sheds further light on the poems and represents an original instance of creative dialogue between poetry and painting, and between poet and artist.
If in fact the essays and bibliography included in this book should represent a significant update to Huidobro studies, they by no means seek to close off or preclude further readings of Huidobro’s continually relevant creative project. The ethic of “new approaches” to which these articles respond gave rise to a sampling of possible approximations that are the outgrowth of contemporary theoretical approaches to literature and the visual arts, among other disciplines. At the same time, further rereadings might explore in more depth the following issues and questions, among a myriad of possible critical avenues:

1. **A Digital/Digitized Huidobro.** In what ways do Vicente Huidobro’s poetics and literary work simultaneously anticipate and evoke the particular technological (re)configurations of literature in the Digital Age? In this section one might also consider the ways Huidobro’s work has been or ought to be digitized.

2. **Word and Image/Visually Huidobro.** The fundamental relationship between word and image in Huidobro’s theoretical proclamations and in his poetry plays out in a radical and transgressive way—especially in his *caligramas* and other visual media during the height of the *vanguardias*’ formal experimentation. How might we continue to recontextualize and reevaluate Huidobro’s visual preoccupations in light of recent theoretical approaches to media studies and visual culture?

3. **Rereading (My Own) Huidobro.** More than sixty years after the death of the Chilean poet, critics who have written on Huidobro might be interested in rereading and evaluating their published work in terms of recent theoretical methodologies or approaches. By the same token, we anticipate that reflection on one’s own work *vis à vis* rereadings of Huidobro’s writings will produce new and surprising critical encounters.

4. **Wrestling with Huidobro.** Additional critical reflection is needed with respect to the polemics that involved Huidobro personally (including his exchanges with Pablo Neruda, Pablo de Rokha, and Guillermo de Torre, among others), as well as those conflicts, debates, or even impasses that his work has produced in larger artistic, critical and academic contexts.

5. **Humo(u)rous Huidobro.** In what ways do Huidobro’s poetry and manifestos configure the multiple relationships between the corporeal and the interruptive potential of laughter? Essays on this topic might explore laughter’s involuntary physiological response and its paroxysmal interruption in Huidobro’s fluid conception of poetry and poetics. If the rhythmic circulation of humours or elements in Huidobro’s writings is continually exposed to the threat of parabasis, then what is the status of the Subject and the poetic body in his writings?

6. **The Future of Huidobro’s “Futurity.”** In light of the “updating” and “new approaches” proposed in the current volume, we might continue to (re)consider the traces or footprints left by Huidobro in Latin American and world literature in the post-*vanguardias* literary context—in addition to conjecturing about the future of readings of Huidobro’s work.
The guiding thread of these new directions seeks to disrupt what is often conceived, in literary studies, as the linear trajectory of critical moments giving rise to literary history. But as the essays in this book show, the insistent emphasis on the question of Huidobro’s modernity takes the “new” as an interruption that is the condition of possibility of the metaphorical narration that constitutes history itself (de Man 159). And while Huidobro himself suggested, in a 1938 interview, that “Modern poetry begins with me,” our interrogation of the Chilean poet’s absolute modernity perhaps brings out the ways the narrative constructed by the critical enterprise reading Huidobro’s contemporaneity can never efface its own origins or its end, even while proclaiming its constitutive futurity.

Perhaps no one has more precisely described this kind of Huidobrian “futurity” than Eliot Weinberger in the introduction to his translation of Altazor (2003), a poem in seven cantos that is the product of its time—temporally situated between two world wars, it is a poem that belongs to an “age that thought of itself post-apocalyptic” and was aesthetically “obsessed with celebrating the new” (vii). This was an age that posited a new conception of time, as Octavio Paz suggested in the 1970s when he coined the phrase “the tradition of rupture”: “Nuestro tiempo se distingue de otras épocas y sociedades por la imagen que nos hacemos del transcurrir: nuestra conciencia de la historia” (1981: 27) (Our age is distinguished from other epochs and other societies by the image we have made of time. For us, time is the substance of history, time unfolds in history). The tradition of rupture, which Huidobro certainly epitomized, “por una parte, es una crítica del pasado, una crítica de la tradición; por la otra, es una tentativa, repetida una y otra vez a lo largo de los dos últimos siglos, por fundar una tradición en el único principio inmune a la crítica, ya que se confunde con ella misma: el cambio, la historia” (1981: 25) (It is a criticism of the past, and it is an attempt, repeated several times throughout the last two centuries, to found a tradition on the only principle immune to criticism, because it is the condition and the consequence of criticism: change, history [1974: 9]). One of the key aspects of this new tradition, according to Paz, is the (illusion) of the celerity of time (a perception that certainly structures our lives): “el tiempo transcurre con tal celeridad que las distinciones entre los diversos tiempos—pasado, presente, futuro—se borran o, al menos, se vuelven instantáneas, imperceptibles e insignificantes” (21) (time passes so quickly that the distinctions among past, present, and future evaporate).

The same terms are present in Weinberger’s introduction—which again confirms, on the one hand, the long-lasting validity of Octavio Paz’s essay, and on the other, the influence of Huidobro in this matter. Although Paz does not name him here, it would be difficult to deny the presence of the Chilean poet in Paz’s ideas—after all, he describes Huidobro in his 1956 book El arco y la lira in the following way: “contempla de tan alto que todo
se hace aire. Está en todas partes y en ninguna: es el oxígeno invisible de nuestra poesía” (1993: 96) (he contemplates from such heights that everything turns into air. He is everywhere and nowhere: he is the invisible oxygen of our poetry [1973: 81]). Weinberger observes the same acceleration that pushes everyone—particularly artists and poets, “the citizens of international progress”—towards the “task of making the new out of the new.” Writing more than five decades later (in our always vanishing present), Weinberger definitively repositions Huidobro’s masterwork’s uniqueness when he suggests that

all time collapsed into the single moment of now. “Speed,” said Norman Bel Geddes, who redesigned the world, “is the cry of our era,” and Altazor is, among other things, surely the fastest-reading long poem ever written. What other poem keeps reminding us to hurry up, that there’s no time to lose? (vii)

Thus with Altazor, Huidobro wrote the poem of, and for, the future—but it would not be fair to simply read his work as a sort of futurist (although creationist) text in the modern sense. What is a poem of and for the future? It is simply a poem that puts forth a call, an urgent one in Huidobro’s case, to face and start taking full charge of “our cosmic future,” very much in the way suggested by Olaf Stapledon (qtd in Nikos Prantzos in the conclusion to Our Cosmic Future. Humanity’s Fate in the Universe): “To romance of the far future, then, is to attempt to see the human race in its cosmic setting, and to mould our hearts to entertain new values.” It is an attempt in which “our imagination must be strictly disciplined,” and this imaginative attempt is closer to art than science in the “effect that it should have on the reader,” since science should always be the source of both potentiality and humility in humanity’s unavoidable fate (272). And it is a fate that poetry should embody, as is the case with Huidobro, clearly a leading poet in this particular respect.5

For this reason, we must go beyond a reading of Altazor as (simply) an antiepic poem tracing metaphysical/metalinguistic failure and (the human) fall, as Weinberger suggests: “Altazor is a poem of falling, not back to earth—though certain critics have insisted on reading it as a version of the Icarus myth—but out into space” (x). In the present volume, while Weintraub’s article most directly explores this new critical paradigm, other contributors engage related concerns from different theoretical positions, insofar as they all recognize that there is more to Altazor (and by extension Huidobro the poet), this “cosmonauta, aviator que se desplaza a través del cosmos en paracaídas en vertigo y ascension metafísica” (Pizarro 11) (cosmonaut, aviator who moves through the cosmos in a parachute, falling into vertigo and metaphysically ascending), as Pizarro concisely describes in her “Preámbulo a Huidobro, jugador aéreo.” All previous critical approaches tend to stop at this point and do not push the reading experience much
further into the future—with the notable exception of the falling-failure pairing—and usually return, as Pizarro does with such critical subtlety, to elaborate issues that structure and inform European and Latin American modernity. The time of this other reading has arrived, a time in which these epithets are not only modern imperatives, but also, and most importantly, they provide a vision concerning history at an almost unimaginable scale. That is why the “root transformation” that Huidobro advanced, as Pizarro accurately describes, “forma parte de un proceso mucho mayor. Su virtualidad de pionero es percibirlo, impulsarlo, su grandeza de escritor es proyectar en él su máxima potencialidad estética, su virtud de escritor latinoamericano es haber construido con éste un discurso de perfil propio” (12) (forms part of a much larger process. His pioneering potential is perceiving it, promoting it; his greatness as a writer is projecting his maximum aesthetic potential in this process, his potential as a Latin American writer is to have found himself and his own writing in this process). However, that “major process” in which Huidobro’s work participates is not restricted to cosmopolitism, the boom of technology and all the other nuances that encompass modernity. It is even more complex, insofar as it speaks of a more pressing adventure for the whole of humanity: that of embracing our (definitively reversed) mythical era, the present-future, if we agree with Jean-Paul Martinon that “futurity constitutes the present space of the future, what can be seen today as the future” (xi).  

It is already time to critically remove or dislodge Huidobro from his allegedly absolute modernity—even more so given that Paz, in his 1990 Nobel Lecture, realized that modernity and its future/progress was always already canceled, and postmodernity was a parenthesis, as Gilles Lipovetsky would later suggest in Hypermodern Times. We must read Huidobro in his absolute futurity, which is not that of the modern impulse, fascinated with the new (airplanes, etc.), but that of “falling into space” and embracing humankind’s cosmic fate. This call is present and is in fact constitutive of Huidobro’s poetry—it is not just Altazor’s call, it is Huidobro’s as poet and cosmonaut avant la lettre, who despite wanting to be transubstantiated into trees to finally rest in peace at the bottom of the sea, he did not forget to tell us in “The Return Passage” that he possessed for us “a love much like the universe” (1981: 221).
Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are ours.
2. Refer to Laura D. Shedenhelm’s bibliographic project updating critical studies on Huidobro, included at the end of this volume.
3. As is well known (and Weinberger does not hesitate to remind us, given its importance theoretically and practically for his own work as translator of the poem), it is likely that “the original of this untranslatable poem may itself be a translation” (xii). Whether or not this belongs to the myth or is a fact, the important thing here is that this situation links Altazor to El Quijote and, therefore, this relationship can be used to predict the place that the former will have in the (future) history of Spanish-language writing. If Cervantes’ masterwork—which opened the door to modernity in many ways and thus was critical of the past—is still constitutive of the dream to return to a golden age impossible to find except in a mythical time, then Altazor is the culmination of the revisionist and modern critical attitude, one that leaves behind and forgets all nostalgia. Consequently it becomes an urgent call to definitively cancel the past and launch the conquest of a forthcoming golden age, already in progress, as Weinberger astutely notes: “Once upon a time, the new was sacred, space became the unexplored territory, and the future was the only mythical era” (xi).
4. It is significant that Weinberger’s translation is accompanied by a blurb by Octavio Paz: “Huidobro’s great poem is the most radical experiment in the modern era. It is an epic that tells the adventures, not of a hero, but of a poet in the changing skies of language. Throughout the seven cantos we see Altazor subject language to violent or erotic acts: mutilations and divisions, copulations and juxtapositions. The English translation of this poem that bristles with complexities is another epic feat, and its hero is Eliot Weinberger.”
5. As in the case of the widely-studied transformations of modern life, Ana Pizarro synthesizes these notions as far as Huidobro is concerned: “El discurso del arte en su asimilación privilegiada de las transformaciones en el universo simbólico no podía dejar de textualizar la nueva relación del hombre consigo mismo y con el mundo que establecía la nueva conformación del universo urbano y el cosmopolitismo que se abría como fenómeno de la tecnología y de la guerra europea” (12) (The discourse of art, in its unique assimilation of transformations in the symbolic universe, could not stop textualizing man’s new relationship with himself and with the world that established the new structure of the urban, as well as with the cosmopolitan impulse begun as a technological phenomenon and by the war in Europe).
6. Martinon stresses the (absolute) focal point of the present, a present that privileges its new relationship with the future more so than with the past: “From this understanding of the word ‘futurity,’ one can then proceed to ‘gaze’ or ‘peep’ into futurity, while knowing all too well that this gazing, or peeping, is only that afforded by our present situation. Alternatively, if one is more inclined to take action, one can either ‘proceed carefully’ or ‘throw oneself’ into futurity, again from the basis of options available to us today. The meaning of the term is therefore unambiguous: that which can be identified here and now as the future” (xi). This understanding of futurity takes us again to Stapledon’s words (qtd in Prantzos), when he warns us that in this openness to the future “our imagination must be strictly disciplined. We must endeavour not to go beyond the bounds of possibility set by the particular state of culture within which we live” (272). We see this “disciplined imagination” not in contradiction with our proposal in this book, nor with Huidobro’s creative work.
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Huidobro’s Transatlantic Politics of Solidarity and the Poetics of the Spanish Civil War

Cecilia Enjuto Rangel

The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) inspired a politics and mobilized a poetics of transnational solidarity.1 From both sides of the Atlantic, Latin American poets like Vicente Huidobro, Nicolás Guillén, Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, and César Vallejo joined Spanish poets like Antonio Machado, Luis Cernuda, Concha Méndez, Rafael Alberti, and Miguel Hernández, in writing in support of the Republican cause. Huidobro’s presence in the Second International Congress of Writers in Defense of Culture, and the Spanish Republic, was overshadowed by Neruda’s protagonist role in the congress, and deepened their obvious rivalry and tensions.2 Rather than revisit these rivalries, I am interested in rereading Huidobro’s poems, political manifestos, interviews, and letters in support of the Spanish Republic.3 Very few critics have written on Huidobro’s texts on the Spanish Civil War, even though his articles and poems show how the Spanish Civil War shaped his political commitment and his participation in support of the Allies during World War II.4 Huidobro’s active voice and political poetics need to be reconsidered since his vision of poetry in a world where Fascism threatens and redefines the notions of a historical “progress” emerges from his contribution to the Transatlantic poetics of solidarity.

The war poetry is often underestimated as propagandistic, damned by its prosaic tones, and its “transparent” language. Nonetheless, this was an era when political manifestos and poem/pamphlets were not condemned for being propagandistic. Noël Valis analyzes Robert Capa’s comments on how his pictures in Spain did not require too many tricks: “The truth is the best picture, the best propaganda” (Valis 9). Valis suggests that Capa’s explanation “reveals how blurry the distinctions were between truth and propaganda. For Capa and for many others, propaganda served the truth. The power and intensity of the photograph can also communicate an historical reality and an ethical-moral vision that transcend (but do not obviate) questions of aesthetic and ideological import” (9). Huidobro’s representations of the Spanish Civil War also tried to project his own versions of truth, and tended to be propagandistic, but does that discredit them aesthetically? For example, in “Fuera de aquí” (Get Out of Here)
Huidobro consciously stresses the text’s propagandistic rhetoric, by naming it a “poema-panfleto” (a poem-pamphlet). Still, I am more interested in discussing how can we read his rhetoric and his use of metaphorical language in comparison to other contemporary poets who also write about the war. How are social, cultural, and racial tensions addressed or not addressed in these poems? How do Latin American poets approach their colonial past and their solidarity with the Spanish people?

In this essay I begin by placing Huidobro and the Transatlantic poetics of political solidarity in the context of the Avant-gardes. I suggest that the Spanish Civil War provoked a new form of solidarity that redefined Hispanism, and changed how Latin America “read” Spain. To develop my analysis of this politics of solidarity, I compare Huidobro’s rhetorical discourse on “race” as a social class during the Spanish Civil War to Nicolás Guillén’s own “España” (Spain) and how the Chilean poet defined race and approached the Spanish legacy in the Americas from a different perspective. Manuel Machado’s and Antonio Machado’s diverse takes on “race” and “tradition” also exemplify how these terms are highly contentious, sometimes ambiguous, and how their meanings depend on the ideological backbone of the speaker. In particular, Huidobro’s articles, “Por los leales y contra los desleales” (For the Loyals and Against the Traitors) and “España de la esperanza” (Hope for Spain) reveal his vision of a Hispanic solidarity and “race” that seems to idealize the Spanish footprint in the Americas. Finally, I examine how through the metaphors of blood and the phantasmagoric imagery of poems, in among others, “Fuera de aquí” (Out of here) and “España,” (Spain) Huidobro intends to support the Republican side and strengthen the bonds that connect Latin America and Spain.

Latin American Avant-garde movements transgressed national and cultural frontiers to redefine originality and innovation in modern aesthetics, reshaping the European artistic scene. Huidobro situated himself in the forefront of a literary movement that stems from a radical rupture with restrictive notions of poetic forms. As Saúl Yurkievich suggests, Huidobro: “necesitó abolir todas las restricciones empíricas, retóricas e imaginativas que coartaban la autonomía del poema” (135) (needed to abolish all empirical, rhetorical and imaginative restrictions that coerced the autonomy of the poem). Much has been written on his creacionismo, his rebellious positioning and on his Avant-garde footprint in Europe, particularly on his influence on Spanish writers like Gerardo Diego and Juan Larrea. Avant-garde poetics, and the friendships that emerged, were fundamental to the Transatlantic re-conceptualization of the literary and political relations between Latin America and Spain, but in this essay I will focus on the Spanish Civil War, and Huidobro’s forgotten, and often underestimated, efforts to support the Republican cause.
In the context of the Avant-garde scene, the poetics that emerges from the Spanish Civil War was not a sudden and a surprising political and aesthetic stand. As Luis García Montero explains:

Fue la crisis del propio callejón sin salida de la sublimación intimista, radicalizado en sus contradicciones por la vanguardia, la que provocó una búsqueda de alternativas en la intención social. El yo en crisis que forma parte de una multitud hueca intenta recuperarse a sí mismo a través de un nosotros rehumanizado. Por eso no creo que deba entenderse el acercamiento de los vanguardistas a la política como una infección exterior a sus procesos creativos, motivada por las circunstancias extremas de la época. La búsqueda del amparo social surge también dentro del proceso lógico de una lírica que ya se había encontrado en sus paseos interiores con los vertederos. (120)

(The dead end street, the crisis of the intimist sublimation, radicalized in its contradictions by the Avant-garde, provoked the search for social alternatives. The self in crisis that is part of a hollow multitude tries to recuperate through a rehumanized “us.” That is why I do not believe that the Avant-gardes’ political inclinations should be read as an external infection, separated from its own creative processes, and motivated by the extreme circumstances of the times. The search for social refuge also emerges from the logical process of a lyric language that had already found itself with the sewers in its internal walks.)

García Montero focuses here on Neruda and Federico García Lorca. Is Huidobro’s notion of the self also in crisis? García Montero’s analysis of the “yo en crisis” vanguardista and the need for a “nosotros rehumanizado” could be connected to most of the Avant-garde poets. Huidobro’s poems on the war also reveal this desire to conjugate his lyrical voice in the plural. For example, in “Gloria y sangre” (Glory and Blood) and “Fuera de aquí,” Huidobro privileges the nosotros (we) as a Hispanic American collective voice enraged and pained at the horrors of the Spanish War.

The Transatlantic politics of solidarity during the war does not mean that Latin American poets were prepared to forget Spanish imperialist history in the Americas, still present in its postcolonial relations with Latin America. However, it is interesting how the “anti-Spanish” sentiment that inflamed nationalist rhetoric in Latin America in the nineteenth century was questioned and theorized during the Spanish Civil War. Octavio Paz, in an essay he wrote in 1938, titled “Americanidad de España,” (The Americas in Spain) addresses this new solidarity:

La guerra de España, aparte de su esencial y dramática significación para el presente de todo el mundo y para su inmediato porvenir, ha señalado, en Hispanoamérica, el despertar de una nueva solidaridad, nutrita no sólo en la hermandad democrática y de clase, sino en la unidad histórica de lo hispano. El hispanismo, en América y España, parecía una tesis desprestigiada,
reaccionaria. Era natural. Con el hispanismo se hacía defensa de todo aquello, antiespañol y antimexicano [. . .] la defensa del régimen de encomenderos, clero y Corona. (69–70)

(The war in Spain, besides its essential and dramatic importance to the present of the whole world and to its immediate future, has signaled in Spanish America the awakening of a new solidarity. This solidarity is nurtured not only by a democratic brotherhood and an alliance with the class struggle, but also in the historical unity of the Hispanic. Hispanism in America and Spain seemed like a discredited, reactionary thesis. It was a natural reaction. Prior Hispanism used to defend of everything anti-Spanish and anti-American [. . .] the defense of the Colonists, the Clergymen and the Crown.)

Huidobro adhered to Paz’s vision of a Hispanism that awakened a new solidarity among Latin Americans with the social struggle and political ideals of the Spanish Republic. Nonetheless, as I will explain further on, unlike many of the other Latin American contemporary poets, Huidobro polemically idealized the Spanish Conquest as the epic poem of the Americas. In “Americanidad de España,” Paz went on to argue that the fight against Fascism was precisely against that imperialist heritage that the Right upholds and reveres. Paz avowed that this was not only the war of the Spanish, it was a war that defended democracy in itself, and thus, “La defensa de España es la defensa de América” (74) (The defense of Spain is the defense of America). As we know, Fascism’s political and aesthetic discourse is marked by a nostalgic vision of a glorious imperial past as an anti-modern utopia; it dressed its insurrection as “La cruzada” (The Crusade), and its recuperation of history clearly privileged the “Reconquista” (Reconquest) and the “Conquista” (Conquest) as the ideological backbone of their war. Therefore, Paz’s claim that this was a war against an imperialist Fascism that threatened all the democratic nations is well grounded. The Fascist rhetoric, and later on, Franco’s dictatorial regime, supported the racist discourse of the Conquest, in favor of the homogenization of the nation: “una, grande y libre” (one, great, and free). In their “nationalist” propaganda, the Republicans were “anti-españoles,” (Anti-Spaniards) financed by the Soviet Union. This was a paradoxical stand, since the Fascists’ nationalist crusade survived and succeeded precisely because of Moroccan colonial soldiers who served as mercenaries, and because of the financial and military support of foreign forces, like Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy.

Huidobro wrote an overwhelming number of articles and manifestos in favor of the Spanish Republic, many of them published in Santiago’s La Opinión and Frente Popular. In these articles, he tried to emotionally move and politically activate Spanish Americans in support of the Republic. Like Paz, he argued that the Spanish war was also “our” war: “Nosotros, los
escritores de nuestra lengua, nos sentimos unidos al pueblo español; sabemos que nuestro destino es su destino [...]. El pueblo español triunfará. Podéis estar seguros de ello, compañeros de América [...]. Ayudad vosotros como podáis a la victoria de este pueblo, que es vuestra Victoria” (193) (We, the writers of our language, feel united to the Spanish people; we know our fate is their fate [...]. The Spanish people will triumph. You can be sure of that, comrades of America [...]. Help in any way you can with the victory of this people, it is your Victory). This is a speech that Huidobro gave through a mouthpiece called “La voz de España” (The Voice of Spain) in Madrid in July, 1937. Just as in Nicolás Guillén’s, Neruda’s and Vallejo’s poems, solidarity with the Spaniards is also exposed through language, and the use of “vosotros.” They chose a Spain they could connect to through this vision of a Hispanic union. These cultural bonds and a common language shared by Americans and Spaniards strengthened the Transatlantic poetics of solidarity.

Many Spanish and Latin American poets portrayed the war as the class struggle that would lead to the ultimate revolution, and within their texts, they also defied Fascist imperialist and racist discourse. In his poem “España,” Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén chooses to emphasize his racial and cultural identity; he represents the voice of Latin Americans, and its Spanish and African heritage. The poem clarifies from the first stanzas that the speaker does not defend the Spain of Cortés or Pizarro, and the Spanish Conquest, but the Spain of the Republican “milicianos,” “los cercanísimos hermanos” (militiamen, our closest brothers). He alluded to the Spanish Conquest to legitimize the current struggle against the imperialistic ambitions of Fascism: “Con vosotros, brazos conquistadores / ayer, y hoy ímpetu para desbaratar fronteras” (Osuna 122) (With you, arms of conquistadors yesterday, and today the impetus to destroy all the frontiers). Both Guillén and Huidobro subscribed to an anti-nationalist political discourse, in their need to recognize the filial bonds between Spain and its former colonies.

Huidobro’s obsession with defending “our race” in his articles is both fascinating and problematic. Guillén legitimizes his voice as the biracial, bicultural son of both Spain and Africa: “Yo, hijo de América, / hijo de ti y de África, / esclavo ayer de mayoralas blancos [...] / hoy esclavo de rojos yanquis [...] / yo, corro hacia ti, muero por ti” (121) (I, son of America, son of yours and Africa, / yesterday the slave of white foremen [...] / today the slave of red Yankees [...] / I, run towards you, I die for you). But unlike Guillén, Huidobro does not describe himself as a product of a Latin American history of mestizaje, nor does he respond to the violent heritage of the Spanish Conquest. Both poets want to stress their unequivocal alliance to the Spanish Republic, but they approach the Spanish colonial past in very different ways. While the Cuban poet embraces his multiracial identity and
establishes a critique of the Colonial and Neocolonial history of slavery; the Chilean poet’s vision of race could be considered more polemical because it treats “race” as abstract cultural value, almost as a “Hispanic” commodity. In his poems, he also insists on “blood” as a metaphor of both the bloody fight, and what connects the two hemispheres, the Transatlantic “blood” stream.

In “Por los leales y contra los desleales,” Huidobro argues that Chilean intellectuals are bound to defend the Spanish Republicans, because they are the defenders of “la cultura” (culture) and “la raza” (race) (de la Fuente 216–217). Huidobro’s notion of race is more “cultural” and “historical” than actually racial. He wants Chilean “intellectuals” to see their sense of self in the “people:”

Los intelectuales chilenos saben que el pueblo español defiende la cultura, defiende la verdadera tradición de la raza, defiende el destino y la dignidad del hombre [...] ¿de dónde salieron Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Góngora, Quevedo [...] Murillo, Goya [...] Picasso, Falla? Salieron del pueblo [...] el gran magma de la raza, es el que produce lentamente los seres de excepción. (216)

(Chilean intellectuals know that the Spanish people defend culture, defend the true tradition of the race, defend our fate and the dignity of men [...] Where did Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Góngora, Quevedo [...] Murillo, Goya [...] Picasso, Falla come from? They came from the people [...] the great essence of race, which slowly produces exceptional beings.)

For Huidobro, “race” means here the proletarian, the working class, which slowly produces these artistic geniuses, who determine the Spanish cultural treasure. Even if we place this text in the context of the 1930s and their conflicting definitions of race, its elitist rhetoric may bother us. But we must ask ourselves, what was he trying to do here? Just like many Spanish writers who tried to recuperate their “Spanishness,” their national pride from the Fascist ultra-nationalist rhetoric, here, Huidobro tries to recover the words “tradition” and “race” from the Nationalist discourse.

Manuel Machado’s poem “Tradición” precisely evokes this National-Catholic appropriation of the Spanish “glorious” historical past and its tradition:

¿Ay del pueblo que olvida su pasado
y a ignorar su prosapia se condena!
¿Ay del que rompe la fatal cadena
que al ayer el mañana tiene atado! [...] 
[...] ¡Goza de su herencia / gloriosa! [...] 
¡Vuelve a tu tradición, España mía! (163)
(Oh, the people who forget their past
and condemn themselves to forget their lineage!
Oh, he who breaks the fatal chain
that ties yesterday to tomorrow! [. . .]
[. . .] Enjoy your glorious / legacy! [. . .]
Return to your traditions, Spain of mine!)

Manuel Machado accuses the Republicans of forgetting their past in their aim to change the present. Spain must return to its imperial “glory,” to its “tradition,” and must not pretend to be godlike: “¡Sólo Dios hace Mundos de la nada!” (Only God makes Worlds out of nothingness!) Manuel Machado criticizes the Republic as a revolutionary and utopian project that intended to create a new world. The Spanish glorious past and the evocation of the Spanish Conquest as the ultimate poem is more explicit in another text by Manuel Machado, “Los conquistadores” (The Conquistadors), where Pizarro and Cortés are elevated as the epitome of greatness.

In “Tradición,” Manuel Machado alludes to a visionary poem, “El mañana efímero” (The Ephemeral Tomorrow), written by his brother, Antonio Machado, nearly twenty-five years earlier, in 1913. In “El mañana efímero,” Antonio Machado parodies the “vano ayer” (vain yesterday) that engenders the “mañana efímero,” and proposes that the only way to stop the cycle is through the birth of the “España de la rabia y de la idea” (Spain of rage and ideas). In contrast to his satirical portrayal of the “mañana efímero,” a product of “amantes de sagradas tradiciones,” (lovers of sacred traditions), Antonio Machado envisions another version of the new Spain:

Mas otra España nace,
la España del cincel y de la maza
con esa eterna juventud que se hace
del pasado macizo de la raza. (233)

(Still, another Spain is born,
The Spain of chisel and mace
with that eternal youth made
from the strong, solid past of the race.)

Antonio Machado conveniently rhymes “maza” and “raza” to identify the Spanish “race” with the working class. The evocation of the “maza,” a “drop hammer” or “mace” is a metonymy of the workers, but it is also a way of confronting its solidity, its strength, with the fragility, the ephemeral nature of the “vano ayer.” Just as Huidobro does in his article, “Por los leales y contra los desleales,” Antonio Machado uses race as a referent of social class. These poems point to a contested terminology, a battlefield of words. The use of the same words indicates the need to recuperate their meanings, to activate them in their own respective discourse.
In contrast to Antonio Machado’s use of “race,” Fascist rhetorical discourse presents their followers as the “true defenders” of the Hispanic race and its traditional, conservative values. Franco anonymously authored the script of the famous film called Raza (with the alias Jaime de Andrade), in which the Hispanic race is conveniently delimited to his followers, since Republicans, and everyone who supported them, were “anti-Spanish.” At the end of the film, the victorious march glorifies this vision of a new militarized Spain, a “purged” nation that suppressed or erased from the map any cultural, ideological or racial diversity. Raza’s portrayal of the march is even more complex if we consider the role of the Moorish mercenaries, who were “persuaded” that they were fighting an atheist Other. The Nationalist Army manipulated the tradition of the “Reconquista” when it seemed convenient. But when it came to convincing their Moorish “helpers,” they demonized the Republicans as the atheist “infidels” and their war was therefore the fight of Catholicism and Islam against the “godless” Communist machine.

When Huidobro insists on depicting the Republicans as the “true defenders” of “la auténtica tradición española” (the authentic Spanish tradition) and its race, he is responding to a fight for words (de la Fuente 216). The war was also fought beyond the battlefield, with words and ideas, and terms such as “Spain,” “nation,” “tradition” and “race” had different meanings and connotations according to the ideological discourse that framed them. This is not to reduce the complexities of the war to a pair of opposing discourses, or into black and white positions; the Republicans had many diverse representative groups (among others, Communists, Anarchists, and Socialists) just as the Nationalists were not a homogeneous group (Fascists, Nationalist-Catholics, and Falangists). For example, while Nicolás Guillén alludes to his own racial identity in connection to his cultural background, Huidobro in “Por los leales y contra los desleales,” addresses race as a notion that responds more to class than to racial identity, and could even represent the “human” race.

In “Por los leales y contra los desleales,” Huidobro identifies the Republicans as the people who value their cultural past and the Fascists who hate it. The Spanish people feel pride in “ir custodiando el futuro cultural de la raza y también su pasado viviente, heredado por aquellos hombres superiores” (216) (protecting the cultural future of race and also its living past, inherited by those superior men). Huidobro intends to reconcile his elitist perspective, in which the superior men are the artists, who represent a venerable canon, with his political commitment to the “people” who really know how to appreciate their cultural past—in contrast to what Manuel Machado argues in his poem, “Tradición.” Huidobro goes on to explain that “El fascista odia la cultura, porque ella significa el despertar del hombre y el adquirir conciencia” (216) (The Fascist hates culture, because it means the
awakening of men and his conscience). Therefore, Latin Americans, and in particular, Chilean intellectuals, must support the Republicans because they defend “culture” itself, and the social and political awakening that it provokes.

From a Transatlantic approach, Huidobro’s rhetoric is more intricate than we would expect from articles or pamphlets that have no clear artistic ambitions, other than merely being persuasive and eloquent in their defense of Spain. In another short article, “España de la esperanza,” Huidobro reveals his solidarity with the people, the oppressed, as he did in “Por los leales y contra los desleales.” Much like Neruda, Guillén, and Langston Hughes, among many other poets, Huidobro emphasizes that the civil war is a class struggle:

La horda de traidores quería detener brutalmente a ese pueblo, aplastado durante siglos y siglos por una oligarquía de privilegiados que manejaba a su antojo al Ejército y a la Iglesia para el servicio de sus mezquinos intereses de casta [. . .]. En España ha cristalizado de repente la lucha de las clases sociales, de oprimidos y opresores [. . .]. Por eso el pueblo español no puede perder. La oculta corriente de la Historia no puede detenerse. (1976: 895–96)

(The horde of traitors wanted to brutally stop that people, crushed by centuries of an oligarchy, a privileged group that capriciously controlled the Army and the Church in favor of the mean interests of their caste [. . .]. In Spain we suddenly see clearly the social class struggle, the oppressed and the oppressors [. . .]. That’s why the Spanish people cannot lose. The hidden undercurrent of History cannot be stopped.)

Huidobro clearly condemns the Nationalists as a bunch of Fascist traitors, supported by the Army and the Church. The use of the word “horda” is a double indictment for the oligarchy because it is usually connected negatively to the working class. Still, the key point here is the comment on the progress of History. The democratic Spain cannot lose; otherwise, History and its vision of lineal progress would be interrupted. Walter Benjamin considers progress as a menacing force because in “the name of progress” many atrocities are committed and permitted. The fetish of progress disillusioned the materialist historian. Just before he explains his notion of the angel of history, Benjamin addresses the contemporary crisis in Europe threatened by Fascism:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. (257)
Benjamin suggests that history should not be read as a progressive line, a constant undercurrent that would lead us to a better future, because among other reasons, Fascism should not be underestimated as a historical norm. In “España de la esperanza,” Huidobro holds on to hope, to the certainty of victory against Fascism, which is part of the common rhetoric of the times. He underlines that the victory of Fascism in Spain would be the apocalyptic end of History. As he concludes his short essay, his reading of History reappears when he refers to how the Spanish wrote the history of the Americas.

At the end of “España de la esperanza,” Huidobro celebrates the Spanish “Discovery” of America, a statement that is now if not almost inconceivable, at least clearly problematic. We may try to contextualize his essay, as it aims to create a Transatlantic solidarity, and remember that in 1936, the word “discovery” had not been challenged yet, as it happened in 1992; however, Huidobro’s rhetoric gets closer to the glorification of the Spanish Conquest:

Hoy, en este aniversario del descubrimiento de América, de ese magnífico poema escrito por el pueblo español sobre los océanos y los continentes, el enorme pueblo de ayer ha vuelto a la epopeya y los ojos del universo están fijos en él y llenos de esperanza. Como hijo de tu raza, y de estas tierras que arrancaste al misterio, mi emoción te saluda, España dolorosa y sublime, de pie y nunca de rodillas. (896)

(“La España de la esperanza” seems to commemorate October 12, 1492, as the day that establishes the beginning of history in this continent. The metaphor of the Spanish Conquest as an epic poem, in which the heroes were the Spanish conquistadors, who “saved” these lands from the mystery of oblivion, is a very contentious statement, to say the least. It becomes particularly puzzling, when we know that Huidobro speaks as a Latin American poet in favor of a Republican popular army, who had not the imperialist ambitions of “el enorme pueblo de ayer” (896) (the great people of yesterday). Furthermore, the depiction of the Spanish Civil War as an epic poem, comparable to the “Reconquest” and the “Conquest,” clearly abounds in the work of Fascist poets like Manuel Machado and José María Pemán. Still, Huidobro, just like Guillén, identifies himself as a “son of Spain,” a representative of a collective, “Como hijo de tu raza, y de estas tierras que arrancaste al misterio” (As a son of your race, and these lands that you lifted from mystery). But he particularly privileges the Spanish race as his
valuable racial and cultural heritage, and he treats America almost as an uninhabited, mysterious land. We may commend his efforts to strengthen Transatlantic solidarity with the Spanish struggle, but his argument weakens as it becomes so Eurocentric.

Huidobro also wrote some poem-pamphlets in support of the Republic, for example “Fuera de aquí,” in response to the South American tour of four Italian Fascist aviators. This text is more a pamphlet than a poem, but the hyperboles and animalization in his portrayal of the Italian aviators intensify the political cry of condemnation: “Fuera de aquí pájaros de mal agüero, aves de rapina que hasta el cielo / ponéis hediondo” (1216) (Get out of here, black birds of bad omen, birds of prey / that even make the sky stink). The aviators and their killing machines, the airplanes, are effectively compared to birds associated with bad omens and death. Rhetorical questions and denunciations frame the text, in which the speaker is appalled at the fact that the Italians dare to come to South America after their participation in the Spanish Civil War in favor of the Fascists. But, once more, Huidobro alludes to Spain’s “true” heroic past: “¿Quién os mandaba allí con qué derecho metíais vuestra infamia en esas tierras pletóricas de verdaderos heroísmos, de verdaderas epopeyas?” (1217) (Who sent you there, how dared you bring your infamy to those plethoric lands of true heroism, of true feats?). He supports his reproach to the Italian aviators with another idealization of the “true” epic tales that fill the Spanish soil.

Nevertheless, Huidobro successfully emphasizes that one of the stronger links between Spain and Latin America is a shared common language. He speaks from Spanish America, whose personified rivers sing to Spain: “No humillaréis nuestros ríos que cantan a España en su misma lengua / con un acento un poco más montañoso” (1217) (You will not humiliate our rivers who sing to Spain in its own language / with a mountainous accent). This resurgence of his Spanishness is understandable; Latin American writers want to promote a solidarity with Spain that would diminish the resentment left by a history of violence and exploitation. Huidobro breaks down the nationalist discourse, and identifies himself as a Spaniard, a Chilean and a Spanish-American:

Fuera de aquí aviaores fascistas somos hijos de España [. . .]
Llevamos como una flor enorme el orgullo de sentirnos españoles.
Fuera de Chile en nombre de los chilenos, fuera de América en nombre de / todos los americanos que [. . .]
comprenden la voz de su profundo origen [. . .]
Esto también es España. (1218)

(Get out of here, Fascist aviators, we are the children of Spain [. . .]
We carry with us, as a grand flower, the pride of feeling Spaniards.
In the name of all Chileans, get out of Chile, get out of America)
in the name of / all American who [. . .]
understand the voice of its deep origins [. . .]
As it is also Spain.)

Although the idea that Spanish America finds its “origin” mainly in the
Spanish tradition should be questioned, I read this text as a rebellious stand
against the Fascist “tour” and the indifference of Spanish Americans who
did not see the Spanish war as their “business.” Huidobro also intensifies the
connection of Spain and the Americas in this poem through the metaphor of
“blood ties.”

The repetition of the image of blood as the violent effect of the war
intensifies the indignant tone of the speaker. Huidobro denounces that the
Italian aviators have Spanish blood on their hands, and their presence will
taint South America. In “Fuera de aquí,” he depicts the blood of the victims
as “our blood,” which is also underlined linguistically through the use of
“vosotros:”

No vengáis a manchar nuestros paisajes con el olor a sangre que
despiden vuestras manos
Sangre de niños españoles, sangre de España, sangre nuestra [. . .]
Sangre que se prolonga en nuestras venas, sangre que viene de nuestras / madres
y va a nuestros hijos
Sangre sublime que crea continentes. (1216)

(Don’t come to stain our landscapes with the smell of blood
in your hands
Blood of Spanish children, blood of Spain, our blood [. . .]
Blood that extends in our veins, blood that comes from our
mothers and goes to our children
Sublime blood that creates continents).

The verses suggest a synesthesia when the odor of blood itself both taints
and stinks, presenting a metaphor with multiple meanings. The aviators are
repudiated because their guilty hands project the blood of Spain, and its
children, but Huidobro goes further on to explain why it is “our blood” as
well. Therefore, blood is both a symbol of death and the life-giving force
that genetically connects Spain, the “madre patria,” and its former colonies
in the Americas—a rhetorical discourse that is frequent and conventional
among the criollos. Here, the “blood” ties mean the creation of a new
Hispanic “race,” the contentious statement of “creating” the continent by
“populating” it. His other poems “Está sangrando España” (Spain is
bleeding) y “Gloria y sangre” portray in a more sophisticated way the
imagery of blood as it penetrates the Spanish landscape.

In “Está sangrando España,” Spain is personified through the initial
apostrophe and a series of rhetorical questions. The speaker evokes a
natural landscape in pain, “Oh montaña ¿por qué te reclinas contra la noche? [. . .] / Oh abuela de los ríos [. . .] / Hay un olor de sangre entre las piedras” (1204–1205) (Oh mountain, why do you lean against the night? / Oh grandmother of the rivers [. . .] / There is a smell of blood among the stones). Spain cries as it feels its blood in its stones, its roots, and its grass. Still, this text reclaims the war as a class struggle, in which the people are fighting for social justice: “Yerguen los puños como rocas desesperadas en el fondo / Y hay un olor a sangre entre las hierbas / Y hay una gran promesa tras el llanto que se ilumina por sí solo” (1205) (They raise their fists as desperate rocks in depths / And there is a smell of blood among the grass / And there is a promise hidden behind the cry, that illuminates itself). The defiant fists are strong and yet desperate, but here the blood and the cry, a possible metaphor for the poem itself, hold on to hope, to the promise of light. At the end of this text, Huidobro transforms blood into salve: “Hay un olor a sangre en toda España / Y esa sangre será la savia del mañana” (1208) (There is a smell of blood in all of Spain / and that blood will be tomorrow’s sap). From the sacrifice of the Republican soldiers will emerge a tomorrow that will heal all the wounds of the present.

“Gloria y sangre” begins with a series of similes that describes the hopeful future, the dream of Spain. The future is like a tear, an interior light, a desire, and a violent hurricane, an iron arm, a fist, “como sangre España como sangre [. . .] / sangre raíz herida de semilla / He ahí el futuro” (1209) (As blood, Spain, as blood [. . .] / blood, root wounded by seed / There lies the future). The blood that nurtures our bodies will also nurture the land, the root, the seed, fertilizing the future. In marked contrast to the regular accusations of vanity and narcissism, in these poems Huidobro tends to be self-effacing. The speaker usually uses the first person plural, and occasionally, like in “Gloria y sangre,” the speaker merges the “nosotros” with the “yo.” In contrast to “Está sangrando España,” in which Spain was crying, the speaker here repeatedly pleas to be able to cry out of pride: “Permitenos llorar [. . .] Lloramos de orgullo repentino [. . .] / Déjanos llorar los muertos que tú cantas y te cantan” (1209–1210) (Let us cry [. . .] We cry of sudden pride [. . .] / Let us cry the dead that you sing to and who sing to you). The poem becomes a song, a cry in itself, in homage to the dead. Most of these poems do not have punctuation marks, with few exceptions, and in this sense, the lack of a final period in “Gloria y sangre” accentuates the hopeful final message. The verses, “He ahí España entre abrazos y cánticos y sonido de sangre / Ese dulce sonido del mito que se torna en espiga” (1211) (There, Spain, among hugs and songs and sounds of blood / That sweet sound of the myth that turns to the ear of corn), paradoxically portray the sound of blood as a sweet, melodious myth. Through the last synesthesia, Huidobro returns to the metaphor of blood, whose sound is a
fertilizer for the ear, the stalk of wheat. Blood ties once again nurture the bone marrow of Huidobro’s Transatlantic poetics of allegiance to Spain.

In “España,” Huidobro’s most moving poem about the Spanish war, the imagery of blood is associated to the music, the symphony and the dance of the dead who defend the Republic, “músicas con sangre” (1212) (music with blood). In “Memory and Modernity in Democratic Spain: the Difficulty of Coming to Terms with the Spanish Civil War,” Jo Labanyi argues that through the motif of “haunting,” films like Víctor Erice’s *El espíritu de la colmena* and Guillermo del Toro’s *El espinazo del diablo* more successfully engage the traumatic past, “precisely because they acknowledge the horror—that is, the ‘unspeakable’” (Labanyi 107). Although Labanyi focuses on how we read the Spanish Civil War decades after it ended, Huidobro’s “España” also tries to face the trauma of the effects of the war through the phantasmagoric, the ghosts who will haunt the political and historical imaginary, and who will not let us forget them. The poem’s protagonists are the constant marching dead, the soldiers we will never see again, but who will always be heard, submerged in the earth.

In the first stanzas, the speaker addresses Spain, and the betrayal of the democratic Republic that meant the Nationalist’s coup, through contrasting metaphors of water:

Traidores nocturnos con alma pantanosa
Hermanos de la víbora y las ropas de luto
Apuñalaron tu hermosa estrella esperanzada
Entre algas y tinieblas entre ríos difuntos

Sopla el mar fabricando pirámides de lágrimas
Fatales escaleras y músicas con sangre
Bajo nubes que pasan como carros de heridos
Por un cielo color turbio de cañones distantes

La epopeya del pueblo que exige su destino
Levanta al cielo frentes y rompe grandes pechos. (1212)

(Nocturnal traitors with a slimy soul
Brothers of vipers and of mourning robes
Stabbed your beautiful, hopeful star
Among seaweed and shadows in the deceased rivers

The sea is blowing, making pyramids out of tears
Fatal staircases and music with blood
Among clouds that pass by as wagons full of wounded people
Across a sky dark with distant canons

The epic of the people demands their destiny
It raises the forehead of the sky and breaks its great breasts.)
The Fascists, associated with stagnant waters, swamps and dead rivers, broke the Republic’s star, the utopic symbol of hope. In contrast to the gloomy imagery, the vibrant wind of the personified sea quickly moves and constructs pyramids and staircases from pain and fatality. The natural landscape reflects the battleground and “la epopeya del pueblo” (the epic poem of the people). The sky is tinged by the colors of canons and bombs, and the clouds are shaped as the cars of the wounded, introducing the phantasmagoric element he will develop throughout the poem.

The motif of “La danza de la muerte” appears as a constant image in which the natural scene merges with the procession of dead bodies. The ghosts circle not around the cars of the wounded, but among the ships that will carry them from one coast to the other:

Y danzan los fantasmas entre barcos enfermos
En la noche del hombre que nutre cementerios

Pasan soldados pasan olas y pasan vientos

Como notas de un canto que asusta a las edades
La inmensa sinfonía con su lluvia y sus hombres
Se pierde en una tumba debajo de la tarde. (1212)

(And the ghosts dance among sick ships
In the night of men that nurtures cemeteries

Soldiers pass by waves pass by winds pass by

Like song notes that scare the eras
The immense symphony with its rain and its men
Gets lost in a tomb under the hours of the afternoon.)

Death, commonly represented as the night of men, paradoxically nurtures the city of the dead, the cemetery. The movement of the soldiers passing by, as a marching band towards death, is beautifully portrayed through the simile of “Como notas de un canto;” each soldier is a note that defines the collective symphony. The enraged tone of the beginning leaves way for a more melancholic, hopeless tone, when the music of war seems to get lost with those tombs. Phantasmagoric metaphors abound, since the main agents of history are the ghosts of these soldiers. At the end of the poem, crossing the threshold means a silence that paradoxically will soon turn itself into eternal music: “Procesión de ataúdes en puentes al silencio [. . .] / Y pasan los fantasmas atados por la sombra [. . .] / Sus esqueletos vivos debajo de la tierra / Serán los clavecines de una música eterna” (1213) (A procession of coffins crossing the bridges of silence [. . .] / The ghosts pass by, tied together by the shadow [. . .] / Their living skeletons under the earth / Will
be the spinets of an eternal music). The metonymy of the coffins as the soldiers who march in a procession towards the world of shadows and silence is contrasted with the last two verses, when death is transformed to another form of life and music. The final paradox of the skeletons that are “alive,” the ruins of those bodies, emphasizes a double paradox with their comparison to spinets of an eternal music. In previous verses, the soldiers were compared to ephemeral, abstract notes, and at the end, when they are placed under the earth, they will be musical instruments, in a way that is Huidobro’s search for a hopeful note.

“España’s” evocative imagery can be compared to the broken metaphors of Pablo Picasso’s Guernica. The self-effacing speaker in Huidobro’s text seems to be a painter, a voyeur, and a witness of history. The army of soldiers is not only represented as musical notes, but also as lights: “Ejércitos de luces al borde de la muerte [. . .] / Es el gran viaje ciego de las velas y el viento / Ya no veréis más esos soldados” (1212) (Armies of light, close to death [. . .] / It is the great blind journey of the candles and the wind / Those soldiers you will never see again). The imagery of these verses responds to the same metaphorical spaces and the aesthetics of fragmentation present in Picasso’s painting: the face of a woman who seems to enter as the wind, through the window and with a lantern in her hand, illuminating the scene and warning everyone. I doubt, however, that Huidobro had already seen Picasso’s Guernica by the time he wrote this poem, since they are both from 1937. The broken bodies in Huidobro’s and Picasso’s works also project a Spain in ruins. The metaphor of the assassinated star in the first stanza of “España” also reappears towards the end: “Los vientos se estrellaron en la más alta torre / Caerán mil estrellas con la quilla partida / Y cada una en la tierra tendrá más de cien nombres” (1213) (The winds crashed against the tallest tower / A thousand stars will fall with a broken keel / And on earth, each one of them will have more than a hundred names). Huidobro effectively transforms the individual lonely star into a collective, a multiplicity of broken bodies, broken names, broken stars, who once again give light to the phantasmagoric nature of the poem.

“España” is Huidobro’s finest poem on the Spanish Civil War. Even though I find that the representation of the phantoms can be effective in portraying the haunting effects of the war, it tends to group them as an indistinct mass: “Y salen de sus cuerpos como salían de las fábricas” (1213) (They leave their bodies as they would leave their factories). The soldiers are clearly identified as the working class whose tool in battle is its own body, its own life. However, this verse suggests an automatism in their sacrifice, as if there were no internal conflicts; they lack individuality, as they seem to work and die as heroes: “Tanta sonrisa tanta sangre tantos heroes que caen” (1213) (So many smiles so much blood so many fallen heroes). Here, the verse signals the mythification of the soldiers, whom we know are
Republicans, not only because Huidobro published this text in El Mono Azul, but also because the speaker in the beginning calls the instigators of the coup traitors. This mythification becomes problematic when Huidobro alludes to the historical past of the Spanish Conquest as an example of the grandeur of the people, with the reference to the American continent:

El pueblo será grande como su propia estatua  
Como ese continente que sacó de la noche  
Como el galope histórico de épicas mesnadas  
Que dan escalofríos a las alas del bosque. (1213)

(The people will be great as their own statue  
As that continent that they saved from the night  
As the historical gallop of the epic, armed retinue  
Giving chills to the wings of the forest.)

Huidobro’s Transatlantic poetics of solidarity go deep into the shallow waters of the aggrandizement of the past, turning the metaphors of mobility, of passing, of construction into metaphors of petrified, static objects: “El pueblo será grande como su propia estatua [. . .] / cien leones antiguos / Petrificados por el rayo y los relámpagos” (1213) (The people will be great as their own statue [. . .] / a hundred antique lions / Petrified by lighting and thunder). Unlike Iván Carrasco Muñoz, I do not find an ironic tone in this poem. As in his short article “La España de la esperanza,” where Huidobro suggests that the Spaniards rescued the Americas from mystery, from the unknown, here the poet once again associates the Spanish greatness to the “Discovery” of the continent “que sacó de la noche” (saved from the night). Huidobro’s vision of the Conquest of the Americas is openly prejudiced and Eurocentric; it is hard to think of the Americas as a world of darkness, stuck in the night of history when we marvel—and some may also shiver—at the grandeur of the Inca, the Mayan and the Aztec empires. This rhetoric in both his poems and his political pamphlets contributes to the idealization, to the mythification of Spain in search of the support of the Republicans. Carrasco Muñoz reads this as the final brushes of his creacionismo:

Los hechos y tiempos históricos referidos en los poemas también han sido transfigurados por la fuerza mágica del creacionismo, pasando a tener rasgos ilusorios, irreales, fabulosos: España es un heroico mar con sus estrellas despertadas, la situación bélica es un himno de luz que estremece al planeta, la sangre es la savia del mañana [. . .] la clave creativa es la libre expresión de la imaginación creacionista que se desarrolla en la transfiguración de sus objetos, que son deshistorizados de acuerdo a los códigos huidobrianos. (1554)

(The events and historical times present in these poems have also been transformed by the magic force of creationism, ending up with illusory, unreal,
fabulous traits: Spain is a heroic sea with its awoken stars, their war is a hymn of light that shakes the planet, blood is tomorrow’s salve […] the creative key is the free expression of the creationist imagination that is developed in the transfiguration of objects, dehistoricized according to Huidobro’s codes.)

History is obviously recreated through poetic language, whether creacionista or not, yet I do not think that his poems “dehistorize” the war or the events it evokes solely by infusing the ideal, the surreal or the phantasmagoric into his poetic landscape. In “España,” Huidobro reminds the reader that those soldiers are fighting for freedom as an unalienable right: “La libertad bien vale un astro emocionado” (1213) (freedom is well worth a moved star). The metaphor of the broken stars is once again illuminated, so that it leaves its own unforgettable traces.

Huidobro’s poems on the Spanish Civil War may have a contentious approach to how to deal with Spain’s imperial past in the Americas, but ultimately what he intends to do in these texts is to hold on to hope, and to contribute in his own way to the support of the Spanish Republicans, who were vehemently “anti-imperialist.” His poems also aim to construct the historical memory of the war. Huidobro testifies to the horrors of the war, and to the visceral need to not forget: “Ya no podréis jamás olvidar esos soldados” (1213) (you will never be able to forget those soldiers). This verse, which he repeats throughout “España” in different forms, stresses the impossibility of forgetting, and the ethical imperative to remember. In order to salvage a certain definition of Spain against the Nationalist and the Fascist appropriation, a Chilean poet was ready to salvage Hispanism with all its enduring “black legend” weight, and make usage of the same vocabulary his enemy was using, “raza,” and “tradición,” to redefine them in his own terms, and evoke a magma, a hot continuum of spilled blood. Huidobro’s poems and articles on the Spanish Civil War genuinely expressed his support for the Republic, and reflect the complexities of the Transatlantic politics and poetics of solidarity.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Pedro García-Caro for his critical reading of an early version of this essay.
2. For a thorough study on these rivalries, consult Faride Zerán’s La guerrilla literaria. Many contemporary poets in their memoirs allude to those rivalries between Neruda and Huidobro, either with a distant, more sympathetic eye like Elena Garro, or in alliance to one or the other, like Rafael Alberti. Elena Garro mentions that: “Vicente Huidobro estaba preocupado porque Pablo Neruda había prohibido dirigirle la palabra, y sólo de escuchar su nombre, Pablo vomitaba fuego. Huidobro era amable, de maneras fáciles y conversación brillante, pero era chileno y las rivalidades son terribles. Lo encontré varias veces paseando solo por Madrid. Conversaba mucho
con Carlos Pellicer, que lo llamaba ‘el Gran Huidobro’” (23) (Vicente Huidobro was worried because Pablo Neruda had forbidden everyone to talk to him, and only by hearing his name, Pablo would vomit fire. Huidobro was loving, easy going, and always carried out a brilliant conversation, but he was a Chilean, and their rivalries are terrible. I found him a few times walking alone in Madrid. He talked a lot with Carlos Pellicer, who would call him “the Great Huidobro”) [All translations from Spanish into English are mine]. On the other hand, Rafael Alberti mocks Huidobro along with his friend Neruda. He recalls in his memoirs: “Elvira (de Alvear) fue quien me presentó a Vicente Huidobro, gran poeta, sí, pero de una inmensa vanidad, rayana casi en lo grotesco. Cuando en el año 1937 vino a España para el congreso de escritores por la paz, quiso en Madrid visitar algún frente, y Pablo Neruda y yo inventamos esta copla, que se le hizo llegar, diciéndole que los soldados la cantaban con alborozo en las trincheras:

Ya llegó nuestro Vicente,

ganaremos la batalla,

que es el hombre más valiente

por dondequiera que vaya. (Alberti 20)

(Elvira (de Alvear) introduced me to Vicente Huidobro, a great poet, yes, but with such an immense vanity, that was close to being grotesque. When in 1937 he came to Spain for the Congress of Writers for peace, he wanted to visit a battleground in Madrid, and Pablo Neruda and I invented a folk song, that was sent to him, saying that the soldiers sang it rejoicing in the trenches: Arrived our Vicente has / Now the battle we’ll win / He’s the bravest man of all / Where ever he may be). I have decided to quote these two comments on Huidobro in Madrid because they reveal the perspective of two contemporary writers, from Mexico and Spain, and are less well-known than the parodic portrait we see in Pablo Neruda’s *Confieso que he vivido*.

3. Huidobro seemed committed to help the Republican side. Volodia Teitelboim explains that Huidobro even wrote to Gen. Enrique Lister to volunteer to fight in the trenches (230). However, Teitelboim also asserts that as part of his rivalries, Huidobro wrote an article against Neruda’s *España en el corazón*. Teitelboim suggests, although he cannot prove it, that Huidobro uses a pseudonym and assumes “la identidad apócrifa de un franquista sarcástico” (231) (the apocryphal identity of a sarcastic Francoist). Teitelboim’s critique of the poet is very strong; Huidobro felt very disillusioned, and he seems certain that he wrote that text.

4. David Bary in “Vicente Huidobro y la literatura social” (Vicente Huidobro and Social Literature) reviews some of the texts that reveal Huidobro’s social and political commitments. Among them, “En Vientos contrarios, ya lo vimos, elogia al comunista como tipo humano; pero el libro no es más que un tejido de aforismos a la cual más anticolectivista y antisocial [...] Huidobro no llega a identificarse plenamente ni con el comunismo ni con la literatura proletaria, como lo demuestra su poesía poscreacionista” (322, 325) (In *Vientos contrarios*, as we have seen, he praises the communist as a human being; but the book is nothing but a web of aphorisms, absolutely anticolectivist and antisocial [...] Huidobro does not manage to really identify himself with communism nor proletarian literature, as his postcreationist poetry demonstrates) He concludes his essay emphasizing that Huidobro’s “social” poems are more numerous in his last books, but that they still represent a minority within his oeuvre and that they tend to be too rhetorical to be aesthetically successful. It is striking to note how forgotten and inaccessible were
Huidobro’s texts on the Spanish Civil War, which Bary does not mention, since it is in 1993 when José Alberto de la Fuente published Vicente Huidobro: Textos inéditos y dispersos.

5. “Fuera de aquí” is in Vicente Huidobro’s Obra Poética edited by Cedomil Goic (1216–1219).

6. According to Yurkiévich, he intended to revolutionize modern poetry through an aesthetics of freedom: “Huidobro practica una libertad de asociación hasta entonces no alcanzada por la poesía en lengua castellana” (137) (Huidobro practices a freedom of associations, unprecedented in Hispanic poetry).


8. I cannot mention all of Huidobro’s articles or crónicas, but in “Envidiamos a México,” (We envy Mexico) he reinstates his plea for Latin Americans, especially Chileans, to follow Mexico’s leading role as a supporter of the Republic: “El pueblo chileno, al dar su voto al Frente Popular, pensará no sólo en sus hijos, pensará también en España, en el pueblo que sangra hoy por su libertad y por su pan, en ese magnifico pueblo que no quiere ser esclavo y sabe dar su vida para no serlo. Y también pensará en el pueblo mexicano que por haber sabido elegir sus hombres puede darse la mano con el pueblo español […] Por Chile, por España, por México con el Frente Popular, con los partidos del pueblo” (de la Fuente 192) (The Chilean people, when they give their vote to the Popular Front, will not only think of their children, they will also think of Spain, the people who bleed today for their freedom and their bread; that great people who do not want to be slaves and are willing to give their life for it. They will also think of the Mexican people, who because they chose their leaders well can now offer their hand to the Spanish people […] For Chile, for Spain, for México, with the Popular Front, with all the political parties of the people). Here, Huidobro is clearly connecting Chile’s national politics and the election to the Spanish war, and the need to be consistent and brave in the midst of such a call to arms.

9. For a very thorough study on the connections between the Moroccan War and the Spanish Civil War, and how the Moorish mercenaries were used and abused, see Sebastian Balfour.

10. A footnote clarifies that its original name was “¡Fuera de aquí! Imprecación a los aviadores italianos en paseo comercial por Sud América,” published in La Opinión (Santiago, 14 de octubre de 1937) p.3, poema-panfleto, in the left margin of the text it says: “Cuatro de los aviadores italianos que están en Chile y van en gira por Sud América han combatido en España” (1216) (“Get out of here! Curse on the Italian aviators on a tour around South America,” published in La Opinión (Santiago, 14 de octubre de 1937) p.3, poem-panfllet, in the left margin of the text it says: “Four Italian aviators, who are in Chile and are on a tour around South America, have fought in Spain”).

11. Writing with blood and through blood also becomes Neruda’s aesthetic claim, a point already advanced by Federico García Lorca when he introduced Neruda to literature students at a conference in Madrid as “un poeta […] más cerca de la sangre que de la tinta” (147) (A poet […] closer to blood than to ink). In 1934, when García Lorca described Neruda as closer to blood than to ink, to death than to philosophy, he was commenting on Residencia en la Tierra and Neruda’s aesthetics of an “impure” poetry, in which Neruda privileged the representation of the concrete. In his poetry of the Spanish Civil War, Neruda constantly uses blood as graphic image of the destruction, for example, in his famous poem “Explico algunas cosas,” he ends with the repetition of the verse “Venid a ver la sangre por las calles”
(Come see the blood in the streets). Huidobro’s “Fuera de aquí,” “Está sangrando España,” and “Gloria y sangre,” evoke the same bloody imagery and in particular the innocent blood of the children, present in Neruda’s “Explico,” and in Vicente Aleixandre’s “Oda a los niños de Madrid muertos por la metralla” (Ode to the Madrilian children killed by the schrapnel).

12. “Está sangrando España” can be found in Vicente Huidobro’s Obra Poética (1204–1208). In the footnote, Cedomil Goic explains that it was originally published in Escritores y Artistas a la España Popular (Santiago: Imprenta y Encuadernación Marín, 1936, pp.2–5) (Writers and Artists in Popular Spain).

13. “Se publicó en la revista Mono Azul 20 (Madrid 1937) p.3” (Obra Poética 1212–1213) (Published in Mono Azul 20 (Madrid 1937) p.3).

14. Carrasco Muñoz writes that: “El léxico, la métrica, la retórica, la semántica, son convencionales, lo cual permite afirmar que éste [“Canto al Primero de Mayo”] no es un poema vanguardista, como tampoco “España,” “La dulzura de vivir,” y “Policías y soldados,” poemas irónicos con un alto grado de prosaísmo” (The vocabulary, the rhetoric, the semantics, are conventional, which permits me to avow that this [“Song to the First of May”] is not an Avant-garde poem, as are not “Spain,” “The sweetness of living,” and “Policemen and soldiers,” ironic poems with a great level of prosaic language). He gives a clear example of ironic tone from “Policías y soldados,” but I disagree with this reading when it comes to “España,” a poem whose hyperbole is not a result of irony but rather a way of exacerbating the very real political urgency of the situation and the ravages of war. The context of these two poems he refers to, “La dulzura de vivir” (January 1936) and “Policías y soldados” (1935), is very different from that of “España” (1937). (See Iván Carrasco Muñoz’s “Últimos poemas: La voz que no decrece” (1553).

Works Cited


Vicente Huidobro’s Salle 14: In Pursuit of the Autonomy of the Object

Rosa Sarabia

Salle 14 is a collection of thirteen “painted poems” exhibited in Paris in 1922 during Vicente Huidobro’s first and longest stay in the French capital. In the totality of his work, it represents a unique and unrepeatable adventure—a tangential space as is all visual poetry in the literary tradition. At the same time they are pictures whose ontological status relegates them to the condition of works of art and thus also subjects them to market values, reproduction rights, the authenticity of the signature, the dangers of loss or dispersion, and the effects of time on the colors and materials.

The foyer of the Parisian theatre Edouard VII, quite literally a threshold space, was transformed from a waiting room into a gallery for an artistic exhibition in which Huidobro wished to echo the title Guillaume Apollinaire had wished to give to his collection of calligrammes: “Et moi aussi je suis peintre” (I also am a painter). First seen in this humble space, the Salle 14 series was exhibited again eighty years later in an itinerant show that was inaugurated in the Reina Sofia Centre for Art in Madrid, Spain, and ended up in Santiago de Chile en 2001.

Of the thirteen painted poems exhibited in 1922, seven originals have survived. Only two exist as caligrammes: “Paysage” (Landscape), which was printed in the catalogue for the exposition that also served as invitation, and “Moulin” (Mill) which appeared in a leaflet inserted in the same invitation. For “Tour Eiffel” we have a schematic sketch, which is one of the seven existing paintings reproduced in calligraphy by Robert Delaunay with indications regarding colors and, for some of them, the inscription “Poème de V. Huidobro” at the end. Nevertheless, the extant poems allow us to approach them as phenomena of complex “crossover arts,” which debate questions of presentation versus representation, originality, the materiality of writing, and the implications of technology.

From the point of view of cultural semiotics, we can read the 1922 invitation-catalogue as a sampling of the intellectual weaving that Huidobro managed to create only a short time after his arrival in Paris. The catalogue (Fig. 1) announces the vernissage of the individual exposition of his poems on Tuesday, May 16th, 1922, and which is to last until the 2nd of June. On
the first page of this catalogue, Pablo Picasso’s portrait of Huidobro is an eloquent introduction that Huidobro would further exploit by reproducing it in *Saisons choisies* (1921) and ten years later in *Altazor* (1931). Also he dedicated several works to the painter, for instance, the poem “Paysage” of *Horizon Carré* (1917) and *Ecuatorial* (1918). These were all evident displays of admiration for the man whose name was synonymous with Cubism.

The authority of the Spanish artist’s signature in the extreme left of the portrait is auspicious in two senses of the word, especially in the context of an artistic exhibition. “Literary cubism” was an umbrella term that responded, poetically, to premises already established in the pictorial realm. Similar was the case of Creationism, the movement the Chilean poet founded and of which he was the only member. The inscription that accompanies the portrait “Vincent Huidobro par Pablo Picasso” bears witness to the type of identification to which Huidobro aspired—that is, to a dialogue between peers and founders of artistic movements through the juxtaposition of their names. As a result, the exploitation of Picasso’s name allows Huidobro to evoke this most famous of artistic movements despite the fact that the sketch itself is absolutely devoid of cubist traits.

On the inside the catalogue reiterates the strategy of using authorities to create the desired sophisticated profile of the Chilean poet. It is also a measure of the cosmopolitan internationalism that characterized the Parisian Avant-garde in which there were more foreigners than Frenchmen during these years. The reviews in French by art critics such as Maurice Raynal and Waldemar George, by the Polish poet Tadeuz Peiper, by the Spaniards Juan Larrea and Gerardo Diego, in Russian by the artist and critic Serge Romoff (Sergi Romov), and in English by Matthew Josephson and by the *New York Times* present a discursive variety that goes from introducing *Salle 14* to praising Huidobro for his “Creationist” poetry. It is interesting to note that the Spanish language is entirely lacking from these reviews and even from the poet’s name, which he tended to “Frenchify” as “Vincent” for publications in French. In this sense, the painted poems of *Salle 14* are evidence, despite a certain grammatical uncertainty, of a desire to be completely integrated into the European center of the greatest cultural prestige.

To return to the exposition, there is little documentation regarding the sudden closing of the exhibition only a day or day and a half after its opening. There is only a brief journalistic announcement and a letter by Huidobro to his friend Juan Larrea in which he describes the “huge success” of the reception by the “elite” and the protests of the “mass public” as well as how the theater took down his poems after a “big battle” took place. In his perception of events, Huidobro adheres to another common practice of the period, namely the desire to shock—the radical, Dadaist position *par*
excellence—by way of which every installation or artistic exposition was turned into a surprising spectacle and site of confrontation. Peter Bürger analyses this “shock” as being nonspecific regarding the reaction by the public, and notes that since it is by definition a unique experience, the shock quickly loses its effectiveness (80–81). Still, he maintains, shock is “consumed” when it is expected or when the press takes it upon itself to anticipate it or prepare the public for it (81). Walter Benjamin, for his part, sees the cultural phenomenon of “shock” in negative terms for the automatic, unconscious, and non reflexive character of the aesthetic experience and perception. In effect, Waldemar George reproduced the review written for the catalogue-invitation of Salle 14 in the newspaper Erenouvelle on May 19th, providing as well a postscript in which he pointed out the closing of the exhibition because of its Avant-garde nature. In doing this, George not only evinced the effect of shock—even when he did it a posteriori—but attached it to an anticipated value to any event in which Huidobro would be involved.

The desire to épater les bourgeois cannot be divorced from the question of the public that Huidobro divided into two distinct parts in his letter to Larrea: “the elite” that accepted his art and the “mass public” that rejected it. The work of autonomous art of insertion in daily life and the consumption of the same constituted an evident paradox in the first decades of the Avant-garde movement. According to Roland Barthes, the revolts against the bourgeoisie were limited in social terms, and were more a matter of a minority of intellectuals and artists who were in fact themselves members of the bourgeoisie. Their only audience, in reality, was the very bourgeoisie they were against and on which they depended financially in order to express themselves (139). Matei Calinescu, on the other hand, analyzes this contradiction with respect to an art that carries within itself a culture of crisis, which is compatible with other characteristics such as intellectual provocation, iconoclastic gestures, mystification, and so forth. In this sense, Calinescu makes clear that if indeed the notion of an elite was implicit in the idea of the Avant-garde, it was also “comprometida con la destrucción de toda elite, incluyéndose a sí misma” (143) (dedicated to the destruction of all elites, including itself). Seen in this light, one can interpret the supposed “failure” of Salle 14 as a success. This limited reception would hold in check the complete integration of art as an independent aesthetic phenomenon, called upon to compete with the inventory of the real, objective world of automobiles, plants, gramophones, birds and fruits, on which Huidobro’s manifestos placed so much emphasis. Despite all of this, it is difficult to measure how great the scandal or protest to which Huidobro alluded really was in the eyes of a cosmopolitan public that, by the 1920s, could no longer be so easily shocked after years of Dadaism.
The year 2001 constitutes a landmark in the pilgrimage of the painted poems when they were brought together under a new optic, that of the postmodern museum. It could be seen as reactionary to have Modernism’s novelty digested and turned into nostalgia. Nevertheless, too much time has passed for the conformity, commercialization and domestication that the experimental art of this period suffered from World War II onwards to signify today an urgent critical reflection. The Reina Sofia Centre for Art in Madrid organized a showing of Salle XIV. Vicente Huidobro y las artes plásticas (Salle XIV: Vicente Huidobro and the Plastic Arts) pulling together the disparate and scattered series of painted poems in a manner that brings to the forefront the complexities, contradictions and nuances of the twenty-first century museum.

This was an intimate exposition that occupied two rooms. It was interesting to note the distinctive classification in terms of the distribution of the reconciled painted poems and the serigraphed reproductions that make up the album Salle XIV today. A certain inversion, perhaps ironic, was created by the fact that the serigraphs were hung in a hall which the public was obliged to cross in order to arrive at the “true” place where the originals were located. The liminal space of the theatre foyer which had contained the painted poems in 1922 now became a kind of ante-room for the 2001 reproductions, as the postmodern museum of the twenty-first century sought a way to reconcile the exposition of simulacra copies with its traditional mission of a place that houses original works of art.

Although the originals occupied their own room, they kept intact the aura they shared with such original artefacts (sculptures and portraits) of Huidobro realized by other artists (Hans Arp, Pablo Picasso, Lajos Tihanyi, and Juan Gris) and the one surrounding autographed manuscripts. Nevertheless, the postmodern museum gave itself the permission to dissolve, without shocking or feeling shocked itself, the frontier between the genuine article and its reproduction. This reproduction, in any case, is not a photographic duplication but rather a type of printing that requires greater human investment and creative work—namely the serigraph—which consists of an impression in which the colors are filtered through a fine screen of silk. Thus the incomplete series from 1922 passed under the cosmetic scalpel of the simulacrum. Modified and rejuvenated, it was edited as an album, just as Huidobro planned to do with his exposition but never actually accomplished. The serigraphed compendium includes a reconstruction of “Tour Eiffel” that substitutes for the lost original, and two versions, “Moulin,” and “Paysage,” colored by the Chilean artist and friend of Huidobro, Sara Camino Malvar. All three have been homogenized in terms of their size and format, jumbling together the names of the artists. The exhibit had an archaeological aspect to it in that it brought together the disparate pieces of a cultural object—namely, the series—that the hazards of
time had left incomplete. But because this exposition was of course temporary, it turned around and redispersed the fragments of *Salle XIV* again, sending them back to their various owners, and thus undid its own act of congregation as it also created a new series at the expense of memory (or aura) based on the originals.

The museum’s standardized album opted to remove Huidobro’s signature from the painted poems whose originals had contained it. As a result, the serigraphs comprise a simulacrum precisely in the Baudrillardian sense since they have no real referent. Indeed, one can read as symptomatic the visual change in the number that the Reina Sofia brought about when they called the exposition *Salle XIV* in Roman numerals.

In his revisions of Theodor Adorno’s aesthetic ideas and in dialogue with Walter Benjamin, Eduardo Grüner has pointed out that under the capitalist conditions of production, the autonomy of the work of art can only be conquered at the price of being transformed (paradoxically) entirely into merchandise. The gaze of the receptor thus falls prey to an unsolvable contradiction between the merchandise-fetish character and the promise of a social rendering, and a reconciliation of subject and object. As Grüner makes clear, this notion supposed that “sólo viviendo hasta el fondo su condición de mercancía puede la obra mostrar su Otro, señalar el camino de la autonomía” (204) (only by living the condition of merchandise to its limit can the work show its Other and indicate the way of autonomy). This condition is closely linked to the depersonalized artistic patronage financed by corporations and public entities that frees the state from its role as a protector and promoter of the arts. Telefónica S.A., then, was the corporate sponsor of the exposition in Madrid and Santiago de Chile.

In effect, the consumption of the work of art by current museum practice is intimately linked to the commercialization of its derivative products. Néstor García Canclini reflects on the transfer of leadership from the cosmopolitan Avant-garde to globalizing institutions and enterprises when he comments that

> (it must be said that the visual arts, as well as literature and music, are changing as a result of participating in the industrialization of culture. Museums, foundations, and other institutions in which aesthetic and symbolic values...)

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formerly prevailed are subject ever more frequently to the marketplace rules of commercial industries so that they must become self-supporting, profitable and continually growing [. . .] The expositions, their advertising, museum shops and related activities organized by many museums and cultural institutions are now subject to the logic of the production and commercialization of images and sounds in the industries of communication.

In the case of the Salle XIV exhibition in the Reina Sofia, one can argue for a gradation of spaces and consumption; the simulacra of serigraphs exhibited in the ante-chamber would provide a bridge between the originals and the store in which not only the catalogue and album were for sale, but also facsimile reproductions of the 1922 invitation-catalogue and the three issues of Creación/Création that Huidobro founded and published between 1921 and 1924.

I now wish to concentrate on the painted poems (i.e. the photographic reproductions of the originals) in order to briefly consider three of the Avant-garde proposals that Huidobro problematized in these works: the question of the materiality, the originality, and the autonomy of the artistic object.

I proceed from a conception of visual poetry as an encounter between two entities—the word and the image—in a cross-field in which each seeks the specificity lacking from its own system: writing becomes figurative while the image is made readable, literally and metaphorically. In surpassing its normal limits, each art makes visible a process of supplementarity. Following Mijai Spariosu’s concept of liminality—a space that outstrips all oppositions and creates favourable conditions for an alternative art—I would suggest that Salle 14 proposes an art whose frame of reference is constantly called into question by surpassing the traditionally-conceived dichotomy word versus image.

Materiality

Together with the dissolution of inherited signs and the dismantling of mimetic modes of reproducing reality, many of the Avant-garde practices questioned traditional epistemologies by emphasizing both the figural aspects of writing and the abstraction of the plastic image. In this sense, both visual and poetic aesthetics became superimposed, drawing one’s attention toward the presence of the material signifier, for which reason many experiments erased the borders between the two disciplines.

Such is the case of the Salle 14 poems that, in reinforcing the visibility of the graph, have recourse to that carnality that Christianity in its origin saw as integral to the visual image, whose materiality made it compete (often to its detriment) with the “spirit” of the letter, as Facundo Tomás has noted.
The words that reside in this sensual materiality display the “thickness” of which Norman Bryson speaks (3) and which Stéphane Mallarmé called the “bones and tendons” of language, seeking in them a symbolic value (962). At the same time, the *calligramme* creates a site of resistance against the linearity that phonetization imposed. A multiple, spatial-temporal dimension thus arises in the manner of a pictogram, which, in turn, questions the ontological conceptions of Western thought—subject, as it is, to succession, to the logical order of time or to the irreversible temporality of sound—following the kind of logic found, for example, in Jacques Derrida’s *grammatology* (113).

For her part, Joanna Drucker complements Derrida’s ideas by proposing a hybrid theoretical model of materiality that combines both the presence of substance and the absence of difference. Typography, like writing, evinces attributes that are clearly physical and whose specificity can only be understood in relation to the historical conditions of its production. Drucker insists that the material form of the outline and the visual, corporal aspect of letters, words and inscriptions are evidence of rules of linguistic use and mechanical means that a culture has at its disposition, and that this form has the capacity to signify if and only if it is part of a cultural code (44).

For the purpose of my analysis I would like to consider a particular painted poem, “Minuit” (Fig. 2). Its calligraphy in block letters behaves as typography, but without the mediation of technology. Here Huidobro fuses two temporalities, that of the medieval manuscript and the rationality of printing, which in fact was to undergo a renovation in the first decades of the twentieth century with the Futurist and Dadaist experiments by Marinetti, Schwitters, Tzara, Zdanevich, and Heartfield, among others.

The block letters in “Minuit” correspond to “sans serif” typography. While its origin goes back to the monumentality of the Greeks and has as precedent the “textus sine pedibus” of the Middle Ages, its popularity is related to the commercial advertising of the steam engine “boom” in 1825, largely for the reason that it was more economical and easier to adapt to the industrial model. In the artistic circles of the early twentieth century, “sans serif” scripts were quickly taken up by the Bauhaus. For example, Walter Gropius, and Jan Tschichold—the type-designer and theoretician who preferred to call them “skeleton letters” (73)—saw them as consonant with the spirit of new methods and materials of construction in architecture, an argument that once more emphasizes the web of relations between the arts and the urban setting. In fact, in their dimensions and exploitation of typographic styles, Huidobro’s painted poems capitalize on the techniques of advertising posters.

Another component that adds a material substance is the papiers *collés* in three of the poems—“Marine,” “Océan,” and “Piano” (Fig. 3)—present in the waves of the former two and the piano keys of the latter one. This
structural element in turn problematizes the illusionist quality of art while reinforcing at the same time the artisan quality of these visual poems. The *collage*, according to Rosalind Krauss, literalizes depth; “for it is the affixing of the *collage* piece, one plane set down on another, that is the center of collage as a signifying system” (37). It is the visual illusion of a spatial presence. In “writing” this presence, the *collage* guarantees its absence and becomes a meta-language of the visual (Krauss 37). If by painting his verses, Huidobro reinforces the signifier of the linguistic sign in its sensual aspect, by using *papiers collés* he underscores spatial materiality in a system of plastic signifiers. In both cases, it is a matter of presences whose referents are absent, although the visual image maintains its condition as a motivated sign (natural sign) *vis-à-vis* the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign.

The Originality and the Autonomy of the Object

The fascination with the origin/original produces the paradox already posited in that very ancient time, prior to any time of experience, that contains the mysteries of the creative process. The Avant-garde brought about, in this sense, a double itinerary, first by projecting itself forward (to wit the prefix “avant”) toward a utopia where artistic experience would be united with daily life, while also returning back to the roots of a multi-sensorial thinking, whether pre-alphabetic or medieval, in order to exhume primitive rites and conquer the past. But this return did not simply suppose a regression so much as an exposition of the rationality to which the arts of the preceding centuries had been subject. To create as nature does—already the rallying cry of Huidobro in the preface to his poem *Adán* (1916)—meant adding another world to the world. To create without imitating was a sign of the times. For Huidobro a created poem was that “in which each constitutive part and the whole present a new entity, independent of the external world and cut loose from any reality other than its own, in order to take its place in the world as a singular phenomenon [. . .] it makes real that which does not exist, it makes itself reality” (“El creacionismo” 2003: 1339. This idea of “presenting something new” not only eliminates all mediation (representation), but also is related to the notion of the present as an immediate experience in which the “now” is the precondition for the search for the new (Drucker 87–88). I would like to focus on “Minuit” in order to see how Huidobro fuses the origin/primitive in the present, and in this “presenting” proposes the independence of the painted poem as an autonomous object.

On a black background, signifying the night, white letters configure a minimal astral landscape: a star, a meteor that has wandered away, a moon. Although “Minuit” has no particular order as to how it should be read and
looked at—thus behaving as a cubist painting—I will offer René de Costa’s translation for the purpose of the analysis:

A heavenly body has lost its way
Be it a meteor or a kite tail the neighboring pageant is beautiful
The moon and my balloon slowly go flat
Nest or atom
Here is the star
This is the valley of tears and the astronomer. (93)

The nocturnal scene makes necessary the inversion of the usual white page for a poem with its black letters. Nevertheless, this inversion, beyond the mere representation of a starry night, also cleverly simulates a photographic negative. In this sense, we are faced with an original that facilitates copies, a multiple series. A process is being revealed—a process of revealing, if you will—the process of mechanical reproduction on which visual, autographed poetry depended for its publication. There is a double and simultaneous chromatic information of a unique moment, the beginning or origin that the photographic negative possesses, but also that of nocturnal obscurity. Mircea Eliade has pointed out that at every cosmic level a period of obscurity precedes one of pure and regenerating light. Universal night possesses a positive value, and in it the moon—the very model of perpetual/eternal return—shows us the true human condition: death, rebirth, pathos, consolation (184). “Minuit” “creates” a moon in its inverted position of the declining phase, and the poetic “I” sees her/himself in it by associating it with her/his human activity that, even as it is playful, is also dramatic in its disappearance.

The verse “Here is the valley of tears and the astronomer” juxtaposes two cosmic visions, which in turn responds to two generation theories regarding the universe. On the one hand, the Christian metaphor evokes the idealism of the salve of the Virgin Mary, in which the “children of Eve” declaim their suffering “here” on earth; on the other hand, the scientific knowledge of the “homo sapiens” alludes to the new theories that were to revolutionize the manner of conceiving and perceiving reality and the origin of the world, and which the Avant-garde would absorb as myth, as Poggioli has argued (178). Huidobro defined the work of art as “una nueva realidad cósmica que el artista añade a la naturaleza y que debe tener como los astros una atmósfera propia” (“La creación pura” 2003: 1313) (a new cosmic reality that the artist adds to Nature and which, like heavenly bodies, should have its own atmosphere). Read through these concepts, “Minuit” responds to duplication; it creates in its interior this universal dimension of creation and evolution that defines it, in turn, as a created poem-object.

Juxtaposed with these universal predicates, we find two verses in the form of an X. “Here the star / Nest or atom” indicate an encounter between
other general principles. Huidobro, like many innovative poets, incorporated a vocabulary that was in tune with the inventions and discoveries of Modernity. The atom, indivisible unity and primary component of all matter, was an object of study and speculation from the pre-Socratics to the physics and science contemporary to the Avant-garde. Since the lack of an article gives to “nest” and “atom” an adjectival function, Huidobro allows us the option of assessing the calligrammed star as a minimal material component or, by analogy, as a primitive image. Gaston Bachelard, in his *Poetics of Space*, analyzes the nest with respect to the house and, by extension with the universe, as a positive and primal image which brings out the primitiveness in us (91).

The conformity between the elements of the universe point, in turn, to the poet’s preoccupation with origins and artistic creation. But far from being an ideal of beauty of passive contemplation, “Minuit” reveals that the process of creation extends to the reader/spectator, a necessary agent for the construction of meaning. According to the concept Hans Robert Jauss elaborates in analyzing Avant-garde “ambiguous objects” (57–58), “Minuit” elaborates a poiesis in which the spectator/reader participates in the creative act, and as a result, the aesthetic dimension of the work depends on him or her and not on the artistic object itself.

The lens of the astronomer/photographer outlines a portion of the universe in which we find ourselves included. The use of the deixis of place in the “ici/her” (here is the valley) as in “voici/her” (here is the star) is a strategy for the eye of the spectator or reader, who assumes the consciousness of his or her own position before the image. Moreover, this use evokes a present that is actualized ad infinitum in each act of viewing/reading, thus breaking any illusion to an external referentiality. In this sense, the representation (a starry night) sees itself shaken from the moment of reinforcing the notion of presence due to the fact that the relation between art and reality is denied and the condition of the autonomous object is exposed.

The grapheme, in its double action as graph and gramma conflates new and old technologies, science and religion, play, art, and poetry. Here, as in the case of other calligrammic poems, one would have to institute a process of “de-sedimenting” the millennial history of scriptural linearity which I have already mentioned. To this we can add the fact that Huidobro chose to use gouache, that opaque watercolor, which was of course a technique employed by medieval illuminators and which knew resurgence among artists in the early twentieth century.

Common to all the Avant-garde tendencies of this period was the view of the formulation of the ontological status of art as linked to a material aspect and to the affirmation of the artistic object as independent from the referential domain. Nevertheless, Huidobro already understood the
limitations of these views when he printed on the back page of his review Création in 1924: LES POETES SONT AUSSI\textsuperscript{peu} INDEPENDANTS QUE LES PEINTRES (POETS ARE AS \textit{little} INDEPENDANT AS PAINTERS). This is graphic humor brought about by an ironic inversion that makes the tiny, superscripted “peu” (little) suspended between the block capitals take on the greater intensity of the meaning. It announces the limits of the independence/originality of art and language in relation to reality. In the end Huidobro’s pursuit of the autonomy of the object was fruitless. Ten years later and back in Santiago de Chile he would wonder: “Why don’t we give to the forms created by art citizenship status in the land of reality?” (Pro. Revista de arte 1934). One could conjecture that the artistic autonomy that Huidobro and his contemporaries fought for is fully realized in the intricate cultural weaving of the postmodern museum.

Notes

1. This essay is a revised version of chapter 2 of La poética visual de Vicente Huidobro.
2. All seven sketches belong to a private collector in Santiago de Chile.
3. His Francophilia made him the butt of jokes on occasion, as when Alberto Rojas Jiménez, a writer for El Mercurio, a Chilean newspaper, (1924), presented him as “. . . Vicente Huidobro, the French poet born in Santiago de Chile” (García-Huidobro McA, 36).
4. All translations are the author’s.
5. In Spain the collaboration of the private sector in cultural matters dates back to the period of the Republic (e.g. “Institución Libre de enseñanza” and “Fundación Del Amo”). The “Law of Patronage,” a project of the Socialist Party under Felipe González, was a decisive step in the government’s delegating a portion of the cultural activities to the private sector. Nevertheless, there is a substantial change from the apportionment of the private to the public to the appropriation of the public by the private, since in the latter situation one abandons the idea of culture as a public good. This final step formed part of the Popular Party’s political program under José María Aznar and under whose presidency the Reina Sofia exhibition in 2001 took place.
6. Worthy of note is Edward Said’s understanding of Derrida’s notion of \textit{écriture} as “visual thesis” (196).
7. According to Krauss, originality for the Avant-garde became an organicist metaphor referring not so much to formal invention as to sources of life (157).
8. In the 1960s Harold Rosenberg stated that under the slogan of “a new art for a new reality” old superstitions were exhumed (12), and Renato Poggioli pointed out—via Bontempelli—a “profound and disturbed nostalgia for a new primitiveness” of the Avant-garde (76). In a similar manner Octavio Paz expressed that any search for a future ends up in conquering the past again (5).
9. Tschichold confirmed that Apollinaire’s handwritten calligrammes were published thanks to the new technology of photo-duplication (218).
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_____ *Création*. 4, Février 1924.
Photo 5. “Piano,” collage, gouache/paper 61.5 x 47 cm.
París, 1922.

Altazor and Huidobro’s “Aesthetic Individualism”

Greg Dawes

Other than a handful of poems—“Despertar de octubre de 1917,” “Elegía a la muerte de Lenin,” “URSS” and “España” (October Awakening of 1917, Elegy to the Death of Lenin, USSR, and Spain)—and brief interludes in Altazor, it is difficult—if not impossible—to escape the impression that Vicente Huidobro was a quintessencial avant-gardist and aestheticist. The aberrant forays into the political realm in his verse always seem like “misplaced ideas”—to borrow Roberto Schwarz’s term—that simply do not cohere with the thematic and formal thrust of Huidobro’s work. As Jaime Concha notes in his study on Huidobro, it would be a mistake to make too much of these political poems, but it would also be erroneous to overlook them tout court:

Sería falso extremar la comprensión que Huidobro tiene, en esa ocasión, de la importancia histórica de los sucesos rusos. Su origen de clase, su formación mental, el proyecto unilateralmente artístico que lo guía constituyen una barrera, en gran medida infranqueable. Pero, al revés, tampoco sería exacto considerar su interés por la revolución bolchevique como extenso absolutamente de significación. (70–71)

(It would be wrong to take Huidobro’s understanding of the historical importance of the Russian events, on this occasion, to an extreme. His class origin, his intellectual training, the unilaterally artistic project that guides him constitute an unstoppable barrier in many ways. But, on the flip side, neither would it be right to consider his interest in the Bolshevik revolution as lacking any meaning.)

The destruction of the old political system, Concha adds, and the creation of a new aesthetic meld at the beginning of the twentieth century and during the height of the avant-garde, only later to part ways (70–71). As commentators on the avant-garde have duly noted, affirming the innovative, the potential of the youth, the unbridled freedom in the aesthetic realm, the creation of new artistic realms as well as shocking the bourgeoisie and overwhelming the political and artistic status quo, all these were in the air until at least the beginning of the Spanish civil war. So—one could argue—even an unlikely
and privileged figure like Huidobro was won over to the celebration of the new in the artistic dimension and even in the political sphere. Indeed, like many avant-gardists, Huidobro assumed, at least from 1930 to 1940, that the Aesthetic Revolution would go hand in hand with social revolution.

Even if we acknowledge that Huidobro’s dedication to writing political verse and his tenuous affiliations with the Communist Party and then Trotskyism were short-lived, we still have to concede the apparent incongruity between his political and aesthetic positions. In other words, we are faced with an individual who in his many manifestos and poetic work defended aestheticism to the hilt and yet, like the Rubén Darío of *Cantos de vida y esperanza* (1905), felt compelled to become involved in left-leaning if not left-wing political causes and wrote a few poems along those lines.

How can this ideological incommensurability be explained? As I see it, the answer is more complex than it might seem. To analyze Huidobro’s aesthetic position is to examine the avant-garde per se and the philosophical and political suppositions that it upheld. It also requires an assessment of the socio-historical moment in Chile (and in Europe) that led to the rise of the avant-garde and to its political counterpart—anarchism—as artistic and political solutions particularly at the beginning of the twentieth century.

As I have argued elsewhere, anarchism became a political force in the late nineteenth century in Chile (and in the mid-nineteenth century in Europe) as a response to the political stranglehold the oligarchy had on politics and economics, and, as such, it served as a catalyst for labor unions, student groups, disenfranchised artists, and bohemians. Yet, as Angel Cappelletti notes, with the triumph of the Russian revolution in 1917, anarchism’s political influence began to wane and ultimately fizzled out as the Communist Party assumed the role of vanguard of working class struggles in Chile (LXXXIX). Yet, as happened in Europe, according to Donald G. Egbert and Miklós Szabolcsi, the anarchists’ aesthetic ideas survived and provided the impetus for the avant-garde (Egbert 339–66, Szabolcsi 4–17). The avant-garde, then, became the *cultural politics* of anarchism and espoused the characteristics conventionally associated with vanguardism: the complete liberty of the artist, the search for the unknown, the artist as prophet or as a gifted genius who attempts to represent the future, the young rebel, the need to destroy the old and create a new spiritual language and open-ended form, the artist as victim and hero, and the reliance on neo-romantic inspiration.

As readers of Huidobro will readily note, most if not all these features are present in *Altazor*. In the context of my argument that means that after a twelve year gestation and upon its publication in 1931, Huidobro’s most singularly poignant work represents the culmination of libertarian political influence and the crowning achievement of anarchist aesthetics in the Latin American context. The fleeting references to that “only hope” that the
Russian revolution offers to the world in a moment of dire economic and social crisis—the crash of 1929—gives way to an artistic project that, in effect, subsumes anarchist doctrine only to divest it of its political significance. In other words, what triumphs after all is said and done is Huidobro’s avant-gardist and aestheticist view. Only art, he seems to say, can save humanity from itself.

**Anarchist Aesthetics in Chile at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century**

It is well-known that anarchism was the most influential political movement in Chile at the end of the nineteenth century up through approximately 1933. According to Angel Cappelletti the influence of left-wing libertarians and anarcosyndicalism declined after the Russian revolution (1917) due in large part to the success the Bolsheviks had as a coherent vanguard and to the anarchists’ opposition to labor and political organizations. Founded in 1921, the Communist Party became, from this moment on, the galvanizing force in the labor movements (LXXXVIII–XC). Yet, as both Cappelletti and Víctor Alba have noted, left-wing libertarianism continued to have an impact on sociopolitical thought and on cultural matters until the beginning of the early 30s.\(^5\) While most of the many strikes spearheaded by the anarchists—by the International Workers of the World after 1919—took place in the early part of the twentieth century, they were also publishing anarchist newspapers and books that had a lasting effect on artisans, members of the middle class, university students and on semi-proletarians according to Hernán Ramírez Necochea (48). The anarchists in Chile, then, first had an impact by organizing workstoppages and general strikes, including the “Semana Roja de Santiago” in 1905 in which two hundred workers were killed, the general strike in Antofagasta in 1906, and the famous 1907 strike in Iquique, in which two thousand workers were slain at the Plaza Santa María (LXXXVII). However, after the FOCH (Federación Obrera Chilena) was originally founded in 1909 and became an indispensable labor organization under the leadership of Luis Emilio Recabarren in 1919, libertarian ideas were still influential but were no longer a driving force in Chile (Alba 379). Nevertheless, there were still hunger strikes, for example, in 1918 and 1919, and there was a major, pluralist anti-oligarchical movement from that moment on that targeted the Arturo Alessandri Palma regime and particularly Carlos Ibáñez’s dictatorship.\(^6\) Since this opposition included university students and the middle classes, it is not surprising that they were readers of left-libertarian newspapers and books still available during these years. Nor is it surprising that Vicente Huidobro, a sometimes rebel against
his own oligarchical background, would find some inspiration in that literature and its attendant organizations.

The Allure of Anarchist Ideas

¿Y Huidobro? El fue la libertad: el que sembró más hondo. En mí y en tantos: en la medida de nuestra propia medida. Una libertad que nos hizo hombres: poetas responsables, con utopismo y todo, con anarquismo. Pero sin servidumbre.
—Gonzalo Rojas (de Costa, Vicente Huidobro 273)

(And Huidobro? He was freedom: the one who sowed it the deepest. In me and so many more: to the degree of our abilities. A freedom that made us men: responsible poets, with utopian thoughts and everything, with anarchism. But without servility.)

According to Henry Alfred Holmes, Huidobro’s earliest introduction to anarchist ideas took place in meetings in high school, where these young students talked avidly about anarchism and the Russian revolution (Goic 29). By 1912, he was editor of Musa Joven, a journal inspired by modernismo that enabled Huidobro to establish connections with the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile—which had its own publication (Juventud), in which the young Pablo Neruda, among others published (Dawes, “Neruda” 319–36)—and the I.W.W.(Subercaseaux 116). Anarchist and revolutionary texts and speeches, like the one delivered by the President of the Federación, Alejandro Quezada in 1911 undoubtedly influenced Huidobro. In his speech Quezada called for resistance against the “desaparición de la espontaneidad del alma” (disappearance of the spontaneity of the soul) and against the “culto del éxito” (the cult of success) and the “la aprobación ciega de todo lo que triunfe” (the blind approval of everything that triumphs). In responding to the admonitions that the youth be realistic and abandon its utopian dreams, he said: “¡No señores, el hombre es un ser que crea y produce, que fecunda y elabora y que al sentirse presionado en las estrecheces de la tierra quiere remontarse y llegar a las alturas!” (No, sir, man is a being that creates and produces, that fertilizes and elaborates and upon feeling pressured by the limits of the earthly wants to rise up and reach new heights) (Subercaseaux 47). Clearly, these and similar speeches by anarchists as well as their writings helped give Huidobro, if not the vocabulary for his creacionismo, at least some general indications of the directions his aesthetic theory and poetry might take. And even if Huidobro’s association with the Federación was indirect, he had to have been affected by their political presence in Chile circa 1911–1912. “La bohemia estudiantil antioligárquica y el anarquismo (con participación de
obreros y artesanos)” (The anti-oligarchical student bohemians and anarchism [with the participation of workers and artisans]), remarks Bernardo Subercaseaux, “fue una marea ascendente, convirtiéndose en un destacado actor político y social junto al movimiento obrero en formación” (was a rising tide, becoming a major actor in politics and society along with the burgeoning labor movement) (48). “Era” (It was), continues Subercaseaux:

un movimiento estudiantil y social multifacético y plural en lo ideológico, un movimiento con un fuerte contenido contestario de cuño ético, y que jugó un rol decisivo en la caída del régimen oligárquico y en las características que asumió el triunfo de Arturo Alessandri Palma, sobre todo en su perfil de candidatura mesocrática, antioligárquica, populista y reformista (48).

(a multifaceted and plural social and student movement ideologically speaking, a movement with a strong sense of ethical resistance, and it played a decisive role in the fall of the oligarchical regime and in the events that led to the triumph of Arturo Alessandri Palma, above all in his profile as a mesocratic, anti-oligarchical, populist and reformist candidate.)

Much as it this is true, one could maintain—as historians Gabri\'el Salazar, Arturo Mancilla and Carlos Durán do—that the movement took Alessandri to task because he too turned out to be a representative of oligarchical interests (44).

Huidobro must have been immediately drawn to the Federación because Juventud and Claridad published the latest on new art and the avant-garde, as well as writings of renowned anarchists (Kropotkin, Bakunin, Proudhon), thus confirming a close bond between left-libertarianism politics and the avant-garde. Indeed, like Pedro Prado and Pablo Neruda, he published in their pages. As Subercaseaux points out, the Federación considered itself a “vanguardia política pero también vanguardia artística (50)” (political vanguard but also artistic vanguard). So, Huidobro was clearly exposed to “anarchist aesthetics” from very early on, even during the period in which he was a protomodernista.

However, the cultural and political activity—though in a more subdued way—of the Federación and Huidobro’s association with it, heightened upon his return to Chile from France after a nine-year hiatus. Upon arriving in 1925, he founded Acción, with an evocative avant-gardist title and then ran for president of Chile supported by the Federación. Huidobro managed to get a few thousand votes and began making plans to return to France. Before doing so, he wrote Vientos contrarios (Contrary Winds, 1926), which, according to Cedomil Goic, shows that Huidobro’s life became “decididamente anárquico o más bien autárquico” (decidedly anarchic or rather autarchic) (51).
But what, then, of the intervening years in France? If anything these years reinforce the left-libertarian ideas Huidobro had in Chile. Quick to find the most salient figures in the art scene in Paris, he befriended Guillaume Apollinaire, Tristan Tzara, Max Jacob, André Breton, Juan Gris, Joan Miró, Hans Arp, and Pablo Picasso. As major players in the avant-garde, in their youth all of them were guided by anarchism. Yet it was particularly Apollinaire who had a decisive sway on both Huidobro’s aesthetic and political views. Indeed, Apollinaire’s notion of creating “new worlds”—of which the Chilean speaks most famously in “Arte poética”—parallels Huidobro’s own efforts to design a separate aesthetic realm that would rival the technological and scientific achievements of the industrial revolution.

Like Apollinaire, Huidobro was an eclectic thinker who explored myriad avant-gardist styles, and relied on the “internal reality of imagination, instinct, dreams and intuition” in forging an individualist and anti-bourgeois view of art (Bates 69). As Patricia Leighton has argued:

For Apollinaire, as for Jarry and Picasso, outrageousness sufficed in its own right to push the frontiers of art forward into that unknown—but unquestionably better—future envisioned by the anarchist prophets. The path they were to follow was laid out by Kropotkin and, not contradictory to them, by Nietzsche and was already familiar to Picasso, Apollinaire, and Jarry in the 1890s: to love genius, to trust that inspiration speaks with a true voice, to reject and rise above the mediocrity of the bourgeois society which is death to art, and above all to embrace freedom—artistically, morally and politically.

The characteristics Leighton notes vis-à-vis Apollinaire, Jarry and Picasso equally apply to Huidobro. But this meant that each one of them had to carry this artistic mission to its individualist extreme and/or break with the anarchism for good. Picasso abandoned left-libertarianism in the political realm by joining the French Communist Party, while simultaneously (and arguably) holding fast to anarchist aesthetics. Tzara, Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, and most revealingly Breton himself also followed this path: however, for the first three, this change applied to the aesthetic sphere as well. Nevertheless, save the political poems cited in the beginning of this essay, Canto I in *Altazor*, and some references in his narrative in the late 30s, Huidobro, I contend, never veered from his initial left-libertarian philosophy.

**Altazor: An Anarchist Cultural Politics**

*Altazor*, of course, commonly regarded as an avant-gardist *tour de force* is also the fleshing out of Huidobro’s own anarchist aesthetics. All the more so because writing it spanned twelve years (1919–1931), thus making it his
most representative poetic work regarding avant-gardist praxis. Responding to the devasting effects World War I had in Europe—and especially in France where he was living—, the economic crash of 1929, the dramatic technological inventions at the turn of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th and the breakdown of Huidobro’s own religious faith, Altazor carves out a separate and redeeming place for poetry after displacing the crises the speaker faces and, more particularly, the radical politics insinuated in Canto I.

In the Preface there are no predicaments to encounter, rather it fulfills its archetypal role by introducing the speaker, who is a poet, magician and prophet—in the avant-gardist tradition—and who, as such, becomes “un pequeño Dios” (55–60) (a small God) and creates his own poetic world and ideal quest. “Un poema,” the speaker says, “es una cosa que nunca ha sido, que nunca podrá ser” (57) (A poem is a thing that never has been, and never will be). In the neo-Romantic tradition of the avant-garde, the speaker casts himself as hero who has a duty to offer spiritual nourishment—in an age bereft of it—via an unattainable Platonic ideal. To accomplish this the speaker has to search out the Virgin, the muse, who will inspire him to imagine “new worlds.” Thanks to her, Altazor—Huidobro’s alter ego—becomes a “gran poeta” (great poet) and a “profeta” (prophet) (58). Life, he lets the reader know, is a precarious and inexorable ride in a parachute to our final demise (59). Only the poet/magician/prophet can elevate the spirit and make us relish the antithetical “rosa de la muerte” (60) (rose of death). The Cantos that follow in succession map out this mission to save humanity from the impending fate it faces existentially, socio-politically and economically.

The most significant of these Cantos is the first one. For it is the only one that presents the reader with down-to-earth catastrophes associated—however indirectly at times—with World War I, the dehumanization during the industrial revolution, the Russian revolution, the Great Depression and lastly, the alienation that results from all this. In other words, it portrays the existential quagmire in which the speaker finds himself only to then give way in the following Cantos to the exploration of poetic language in a celestial, sublime background (Concha 285–86). In the opening lines, reminiscent of a soliloquy, Altazor addresses himself and the terrible misfortunes he has faced. He has lost his “primera serenidad” (first serenity)—presumably when he was a believer—and the loss of his faith has subjected him to “angustia” (anguish), “el terror de ser” (a fear of being), “vientos de dolor” (winds of pain), and solitude. Worst of all, he senses that he lives but is not really living (“vives y no te ves vivir”) (61). The tormented speaker, then, faces a vast universe and a world where “No hay bien no hay mal ni verdad ni orden ni belleza” (There is no good no bad nor truth nor order nor beauty) and knows full well that “morirás Se secará tu voz y serás / invisible / La Tierra seguirá girando sobre su órbita precisa”
(62) (you will die Your voice will dry up and you will be / invisible / The Earth will continue revolving on its precise orbit). Alienated from his fellow human beings and from himself, what is left but to write about the very crisis that is destroying him? And so “caer” (to fall) is the only alternative that allows him to accept his lack of faith (“limpia tu cabeza de prejuicio y moral”) (62) (cleanse your head of prejudice and morality) and live up to the worn but reliable creed of carpe diem.

Falling permits Altazor to rid himself momentarily of the anguish and impotence he feels and face the succession of events in life, but anxieties and agonies reemerge and overtake him:

Abrió los ojos en el siglo
En que se moría el cristianismo
Retorcido en su cruz agonizante
Ya va a dar el último suspiro
¿Y mañana qué pondremos en el sitio vacío? (64)

(I opened my eyes to a century
in which Christianity was dying
Twisted on its agonizing cross
So it will have its last breath
And tomorrow what will we put in its place?)

Confronted with the social devastation left by the industrial revolution and most clearly so by World War I and then the Great Depression, Huidobro’s mindset in many ways recalls Walter Benjamin’s in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” The “storm” of progress leaves behind a pile of debris, yet Paul Klee’s “Angelus Novus” still turns his face toward the future (257–58). For Huidobro this view is compounded by the disappearance of ethics and the loss of faith. Clearly, the line that resonates here and sets up the aestheticist bent of the rest of this book of poetry is the last one: “¿Y mañana qué pondremos en el sitio vacío?” (64) (And tomorrow what will we put in its place?). For Christianity has been unsuccessful in its attempt to halt the carnage during the first of the total wars and, as such, Huidobro suggests, has allowed Christ to die in vain and the faith of millions as well (“El Cristo quiere morir acompañado de millones de almas” (64) (Christ wants to die accompanied by millions of souls). In its place comes the development and glorification of technology—secular modernity—but it is unable to fill the existential void left by Christianity: “Mil aeroplanos saludan la nueva era / Ellos son los oráculos y las banderas” (65) (A thousand airplanes salute the new era / They are the oracles and the flags). For the moment Huidobro leaves his readers in suspense. Is this all there is then?
However, in the following improbable stanza, part of which was certainly written in 1919, the speaker addresses the enormous tragedy of World War I and offers a succinct solution:

Soy yo que estoy hablando en este año de 1919  
Es el invierno  
Ya la Europa enterró todos sus muertos  
Y un millar de lágrimas hacen una sola cruz de nieve  
Mirad esas estepas que sacuden las manos  
Millones de obreros han comprendido al fin  
Y levantan al cielo sus banderas de aurora  
Venid venid os esperamos porque sois la esperanza  
La única esperanza  
La última esperanza (65).

(It is I who is talking this year of 1919  
It is winter  
Europe has already buried all its dead  
And a million tears become a single wintry cross  
Look at steppes which shake the hands  
Millions of workers have finally understood  
And they lift their dawning flags up  
Come come we await you because you are hope  
The only hope  
The last hope.)

Dramatically and effectively juxtaposed with the despairing atmosphere at the end of the Great War, the evocation of the Russian revolution as the focal point for revolutions the world over certainly proposes to satisfy the enormous spiritual and/or moral void that had arrested the speaker up to this point. Moreover, it appears as a confirmation of Huidobro’s anarchist or possibly anarccommunist ideas and, because of its prominent place in the text, suggests that Huidobro will be elaborating this theme at length or at least often throughout the book. And yet, as readers of Altazor know, he does return to the notion of ubiquitous alienation in the “Age of Total War”—as Eric Hobsbawm calls it—of human beings and of the working class on one occasion in Canto I (76), but other than that, the sought after solution that satiates the souls of human beings disappears from the rest of the text.

How can we explain this paradox? Because the evidence is scant, I can only conjecture that the first lines cited above were indeed written in 1919 but the remaining lines were written later, close to the publication date.
(1931). For as noted up to now, Huidobro was influenced by anarchism and was interested in the Russian revolution as far back as his late teens, but it was not until around 1930 that he began to call himself a communist and claimed at least that he was a member. And it was at that stage that one would expect him to offer socialist revolution as an answer. Although it is conceivable that as an anarchist in, say, 1919 he might have endorsed revolutionary change, his newspaper and journal articles do not show any sign of that kind of political stance. At any rate, the fact remains that the grand solution incarnated in the Bolshevik revolution or anything resembling it does not make its way back into Altazor. From this moment on, once the speaker has overcome the anguish and despair, the revolution becomes poetic.

One could argue that the rest of Canto I deals in an almost Bloomian or Eliot-like manner with the poet’s struggle with his abilities, the poetic Tradition, his precursors, and, as Octavio Paz puts it, the poet’s “other voice.” Altazor’s answer is: “Canta el caos al caos por todo el universo” (67) (Sing the chaos to chaos throughout the universe), that is, in an archetypically avant-gardist vein, reflect the disorder left by the end of World War I and industrialization of society in form, in language. As a consummate experimentalist, Huidobro proceeds a pace with his goal to break poetic structure and language down completely, which he achieves in Canto VII. And he can also avail himself of prototypical avant-gardist techniques: arbitrary associations, the exaltation of metaphor, simultaneity, syntactical disruptions, sudden illogical ties between images, neologisms, the creation of visual images via poetry, and so on. While doing so, Huidobro advocates “Consumamos el placer / Agotemos la vida en la vida” (67) (Let’s consume pleasure / We exhaust life in life). An attempt at questioning the boundaries between life and art in typical avant-gardist fashion no doubt, this carpe diem resonates very well with anarchism’s “aesthetic individualism.” Following this path, Huidobro creates a separate artistic realm that will not be as weighed down by the very impassess the speaker faced in the beginning of Canto I:

Liberación, ¡Oh! sí liberación de todo
De la propia memoria que nos posee
De las profundas vísceras que saben lo que saben
A causa de estas heridas que nos atan al fondo
Y nos quiebran los gritos de las alas (71).

(Liberation, Oh yes liberation from everything
From our memory that possesses us
From the profound viscera that know what they know
Due to those wounds that tie us down in the end
And break the cries of wings.)
The search for uninhibited liberation leads Altazor to formulate his own response to the anguish and emptiness in the air at this historical moment:

Desafiaré al vacío
Sacudiré la nada con blasfemias y gritos
Hasta que caiga un rayo de castigo ansiado
Trayendo a mis tinieblas el clima del paraíso (71).

(I will challenge the void
I will shake nothingness with blasphemes and cries
Until a flash of desired punishment falls
Bringing to my darkness the surroundings of paradise.)

Poet and anti-poet, his challenge will be to record the chaos and “shake” it. Not, however, via social critique, much less social revolution. The revered workers in the section on the Russian revolution return now but with other dehumanized human beings who suffer under the exploitation of the machines of modernity and who have no hope of salvation except in poetry:

Las palabras con fiebre y vértigo interno
Las palabras del poeta dan un marco celeste
Dan una enfermedad de nubes
Contagioso infinito de planetas errantes
Epidemia de rosas en la eternidad (79).

(Words with fever and internal vertigo
The poet’s words trace a celestial design
They bequeath cloudy illness
Contagious infinite of erring planets
Roses’ epidemic in eternity.)

On the one hand, then, in a neoromantic way the speaker aims to recreate Rubén Darío’s “sed de cielo” (thirst for the heavens), thus reaffirming the philosophically idealist affinity between modernismo and creacionismo. On the other hand, he is very much the avant-gardist who scrutinizes, alters and distrusts language, who only wants to give the reader a “música del espíritu” (81) (music of the spirit). Both of these positions fuse into one as they are expressed—in vintage Huidobrian manner—in two lines in the denouement of Canto I: “La palabra electrizada de sangre y corazón / Es el gran paracaídas y el pararrayos de Dios” (83) (The electricized word of blood and heart / Is God’s great parachute and lightning rod). The modern invocation of technology dovetails here with his neoromantic poetic and spiritual quest. In other words, poetry and spirituality return to satisfy the immense void left by the calamities at the beginning of the Canto.
Establishing a Creationist Poetics

To flesh out a new avant-gardist poetics, Altazor needs a muse who will represent the celestial aspirations of his work, but also some of the earthly references required to ground it. Canto II, in my view one of the best in Altazor, then, fulfills both of those needs (85–91). This Canto establishes Ximena Amunátegui—the young high schooler and future life partner Huidobro fell in love with, thus shocking the Chilean upper class of which they were both members—as his muse. Although she is somewhat ephemeral because of the links the speaker makes between her physical and personal attributes—she is associated with the infinite and immortal throughout—and so seems to echo his ethereal desires and give them sustenance, she also reflects some indispensable earthly and physical qualities. Her corporeal presence—her hypnotizing beauty (“Eres una lámpara de carne en la tormenta”) (89) (You are a lamp of flesh in the storm)—as well as her seductive grace and her way of making love allow Altazor to discover the heights of poetic expression. That is why, as he puts it in the first stanza, “Se hace más alto el cielo en tu presencia / La tierra se prolonga de rosa en rosa / Y el aire se prolonga de paloma en paloma” (85) (The sky stretches higher because of your presence / The earth prolongs itself from rose to rose / And the air prolongs itself from dove to dove). Thanks to his muse’s presence, the parachute traveler can viscerally gain access to the worldly. Although they are both “cosidos / A la misma estrella” (87) (sewn to the same star) and thus occupy the heavens together, which would seem to distance him even farther from the earthly; if she were gone Altazor would fall precipitously. Indeed, her concreteness, her palpable presence, allows him to communicate with the abstract (“un imperio en el espacio,” “el infinito,” “el murmullo en la eternidad,” “las centellas del éter” (90) (an empire in space, the infinite, the murmuring of eternity, the flashes of ether). Ximena too plugs the gaping abyss from the beginning of Canto I.

And thanks to her Altazor can break with poetic traditions and carry out the experimentalism in the remaining Cantos, which I will touch upon briefly. The third Canto borrows references from the modern city to jolt the reader into considering different word associations. Consider, for instance, the following line: “El mar es un tejado de botellas” (93) (The sea is a roof of bottles). Here Huidobro is relying upon a series of connections the reader will perhaps make. Given the Chilean context, the bottles are likely green and empty but they formerly contained wine. It also suggests that the viewer shares the great pleasure of gazing at the sea with someone else, much as s/he would share a bottle of wine with someone. Moreover, compared to a rooftop the bottles emulate the green, glittering waves in the Pacific Ocean. In this and countless other examples Huidobro uses what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson call an “idiosyncratic conceptual metaphor” to create a “new
world” to be sure, but also to simply have the readers step outside of their conventional way of conceiving things (50). For Huidobro, as he remarks in Canto III, this endeavor becomes a “sport” or a “game” (97) played, once again, in the celestial domain: “Combate singular entre el pecho y el cielo / Total desprendimiento al fin de voz de carne / Eco de luz que sangra aire sobre el aire” (98) (Singular battle between breast and sky / Complete detachment finally from the voice of flesh / Echo of light that bleeds aire upon air). And this leads to silence, to nothing.

Thus the urgent need to retreat to his muse in Canto IV in order to wage poetic battle against the emptiness. Using more conventional metaphors because, we infer, he was unable to sustain the experimentation, Ximena is depicted as a nurse “de sombras y distancias / Yo vuelvo a ti huyendo del reino incalculable / De ángeles prohibidos por el amanecer” (99) (of shadows and distances / I return to you fleeing the incalculable kingdom / Of angels prohibited by the dawn). Altazor seeks refuge from the various angels that haunted him in Canto I and, as such, kept him immersed in his misery. The metaphorical eye in the hurricane, the stability amidst chaos, or his muse’s eyes (the proverbial window of the soul, love) give him the motivation to continue his creative game (beginning on page 101). As readers of Huidobro know, he then turns to the intersection between painting and poetry in a way analogous to the “poèmes dessins” or the “visible lyricism” of Apollinaire to create a landscape with the suffixes of words after transposing suffixes and prefixes in earlier lines (105).

Using Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer’s famous romantic reference to the “dark swallows,” and appending suffixes to “golondr”—the first part of “golondrina” (swallow)—Huidobro portrays a scene in which a child in the Orient does pirouettes and sings presumably among birds during the day, thus celebrating the concert between music, the visual arts and linguistic innovation. This experiment, as well as another shortly thereafter with the musical scale sandwiched in between the same prefixes and suffixes (106), mark the most unusual formal transformations in Canto IV and they indicate the direction and relative unity—the unity of fragments one might say—of his project to this point: “Darse prisa darse prisa / Están prontas las semillas / Esperando una orden para florecer” (107) (Hurry hurry / The seeds are ready / Waiting for order to flower).

After these passages, Altazor plays with internal rhythm and alliteration as he describes individuals who have passed away and also announces his own demise: “Aquí yace Altazor azor fulminado por la altura / Aquí yace Vicente Huidobro antipoeta y mago” (108) (Here lies Altazor goshawk fulminated by the heights / Here lies Vicente Huidobro antipoet and magician). Like the mythic Icarus, then, Altazor seems to have met his fate for having dared to reach the highest of heights, yet he awaits resurrection in order to continue his verbal battle against the void (108–09). Indeed, he
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seems to have perceived a way out at the end of the poem. He must look for the lowest common denominator that can still provide rhythm and musicality, the pillars of poetry (110).

Canto V picks up from the concluding thoughts in the previous canto and begins building on it: “Aquí comienza el campo inexplorado” (111) (Here begins the unexplored field). The best known and most significant part in this poem is the word generation based on the windmill image. Although that trope invites many interpretations, which rely on extratextual information—the most obvious signified being the windmill in *Don Quijote de la Mancha*—for Huidobro the aestheticist, the windmill is either metaphor or simile for the poet. Anchored on the earth, but with his eyes cast to the sky, like the personified windmill, the poet is a “charlador” (talker) and “cantador” (singer) who hipnotizes with his word crafting and his prophetic mission (124). And, in typical avant-gardist imagery, he is a victim/hero, a martyr we might say, who dedicates his life to this excruciating yet creative task (124, 129). In short, his work emerges from the inspiration literary tradition proffers—the example of Don Quijote—and its continuation and renovation, incarnated in the airplane that appears at the very end of Canto V: “El cielo está esperando un aeroplano” (129) (The sky is awaiting an airplane). Based on Apollinaire’s metaphor and Marinetti’s futurist imagery, this line sums up Huidobro’s own calling. The modern poet must still create “new worlds” non-mimetically.

And Cantos VI and VII are dedicated to precisely that type of discovery. A few comments on them will suffice. In his most adventurous experimentation up to this point, Canto VI employs word images that would be equivalent to a series of slides, providing a type of lyric collage throughout that is held together by metaphorical chains (the flower=poetry, lifesaver; and night=our inevitable death). Canto VI, then, functions as a cathartic moment in which the poet finally finds and accepts his role in life: “Cristal sueño / Cristal viaje / Flor y noche / Con su estatua / Cristal muerte” (135) (Crystal dream / Crystal voyage / Flower and night / With its statue / Crystal death). These apparent antitheses synthesize and reflect the speaker’s own coming to terms with the coexistence of his life and work in the face of impending death.

Canto VII commences with insights furnished in the last lines of Canto IV: that the poet (and antipoet) must break language down to its most basic constituent parts and begin creating anew. In doing so, Altazor initiates this creative process with vowels and then invents words containing fragments which are words or fragments of words that exist in Spanish or French to conjure up a linguistic world with partial referents, only to then end this very short Canto the way it began (137–38).

Two conclusions come to mind regarding Canto VII and therefore *Altazor* per se. Either Huidobro’s avant-gardist task has been to destroy in
order to create, or recreate, or he has reached an ideal realm expressed only via the musicality of vowels and attained at this metaphysical level only by relying at least in part on the physical. Sounding out the vowels at the beginning we are reminded of two lovers in the throes of lovemaking who achieve climax at the very end of Canto VII, thus confirming the connection with *Temblor de cielo*, also published in 1931, which outlined sex and sexuality as the life goal of human beings.  

*Altazor*, then, never really concludes because its denouement is regeneration and re-creation. The liberation of language, then, goes hand in hand with sexual liberation, and revolution and social change in general vanish. One is left then with a ludic game that ostensibly fills the empty space left by socio-historical, political, economic and personal crises. Or put another way: in the face of those social calamities, in a gesture which we would not hesitate to describe as “the personal is political,” only the realms of language exploration and intimate sexuality can be salvaged in a world in which, seemingly, “There is no good there is no bad nor truth nor order nor / beauty” (62).

In sum, readers are left, then, with a classic of “aesthetic individualism” or of “anarchist aesthetics” which has managed to erase its social, political and economic points of reference. “Experimentalism so conceived,” maintains Renato Poggioli in his seminal work on the avant-garde, “is at once a stepping stone to something else and is gratuitous; if one looks closely it is, when not harmful, useless or extraneous to art itself” (135). And yet the unending search for the new, the modern and the total liberation of the individual is really, as Gene Bell-Villada notes astutely, “a dynamic surprisingly analogous to the individualistic and libertarian side of bourgeois life.” “The aesthetic utopia of total artistic freedom,” he continues, “has the same logic and configuration as the market utopia of total business freedom, generated by nineteenth-century capitalism and by its survivals and revivals in the late twentieth” (145). Though this “aesthetic utopia” has its roots in anarchism, as I have argued in this essay the politics behind that movement has been displaced, and in its stead stands liberalism, the quintessential individualist ideology under capitalism.

But what then of those few poems—“España,” “URSS,” “Policías y soldados” and “Elegía a la muerte de Lenin” (“Spain,” “USSR,” “Police and Soldiers” and “Elegy to the Death of Lenin”)—written in the mid 30s which seem to signal a break with aestheticism? Although certainly not negligible, two things stand out. First, they are not representative of Huidobro’s work even in the 30s, rather they are anomalies which appear in small segments of his narrative and poetry.  

Second, and more importantly, the overall view continues to be aestheticist. Huidobro heralds Lenin in his elegy, for instance, as a heroic individual figure who has initiated a “new era,” has sung the “song of the multitudes,” and has illuminated human beings thanks to his “words” and his “language.” It is difficult not to see this too, as
Enrique Lihn puts it, as “su fervor romántico por los grandes destinos humanos individuales” (378) (his romantic fervor for the great individual human destinies) and nothing more, or, at best, an aestheticist interpretation of Lenin and his role in the Russian revolution. Consequently, even in these socially motivated poems, Huidobro’s Modernist inclinations hold supreme and the socio-political events that inspired them fade into the background, thus confirming the primacy of the liberal aesthetic in his work.

Notes

1. This and all translations to English in this essay are mine.
2. This is the thesis of my forthcoming book, Poetas ante la modernidad: Vallejo, Huidobro, Neruda y Paz (Editorial Fundamentos).
3. Bernardo Subercaseaux, Genealogía de la vanguardia en Chile (47–49), and Nelson Osorio, “Para una caracterización histórica del vanguardismo literario hispanoamericano” (227–54).
4. For more on the notion of “anarchist aesthetics” see Egbert and especially André Reszler’s La estética anarquista.
5. Cappelletti maintains that anarchism’s impact can be felt as late as 1933, whereas Alba argues—in Historia del movimiento obrero en América Latina (100)—that its influence wanes by 1931.
6. See Gabriel Salazar, Arturo Mancilla, Carlos Durán, Historia contemporánea de Chile: Estado, legitimidad, ciudadanía (40–41, 65, 71), and Nelson Osorio, “Literatura de postguerra: renovación y vanguardia” (121–23). The central evidence that solidified the opposition to oligarchical rule was the “Reforma Universitaria” in 1918.
7. Regarding the ties between Musa Joven and the Federación de Estudiantes. As regards the connection between the I.W.W. and the Federación, see Cappelletti, LXXXVIII–LXXXIX.
8. On Apollinaire’s effect on Huidobro see Teitelboim’s account (58–64, 72–74).
10. On heroism and the avantgardist see Poggioli (66).
11. Huidobro’s affiliation with the French—and, for that matter, Chilean—Communist Party is unresolved. René de Costa says that he probably joined or at least claimed that he joined between 1929 and 1931 (Huidobro: Careers of a Poet 108); Jaime Concha in Vicente Huidobro alleges that he struck “poses de comunista” (poses as a Communist) and that his self-affirmation as Communist was also “el colmo de su individualismo” (13, 80) (the height of his individualism); and Volodia Teitelboim, former Secretary General of the Communist Party in Chile and biographer of Huidobro asserts that the poet joined the French Communist Party in 1930 like many intellectuals of the period (Huidobro: la marcha infinita 156). See also my article on Huidobro’s political and aesthetic beliefs, “Huidobro: entre el esteticismo vanguardista y la izquierda” (41–56).
12. For more on this see Hugo Verani, “Las vanguardias literarias en Hispanoamérica”; Federico Schopf, “El vanguardismo poético en Hispanoamérica,” and, more generally, Renato Poggioli’s The Theory of the Avant-Garde.
13. As Peter Bürger points out, this happens as art—beginning with Aestheticism—claims its independence from its duty to reproduce the events in social life and from the institution of art per se. See especially, “The Avant-garde as the Self-Criticism of Art in Bourgeois Society” (20–27).

14. René de Costa maintains correctly that Huidobro did not cleanly break with modernismo, but rather thought out his creacionismo in part based on the aesthetic precepts of the former. Consult his “Del modernismo a la vanguardia: el creacionismo pre-polémico” (261–74). Darío’s “sed de cielo” appears in “Yo soy aquel” in Azul . . . Cantos de vida y esperanza (339–43).

15. As is well known, the avant-gardists wanted to “do away with the dividing lines between the arts, the division of architecture and sculpture, poetry and the plastic arts,” Miklós Szabolcsi, “Avant-garde, Neo-avant-garde, Modernism: Questions and Suggestions” (56). On “visible lyricism” see Poggioli (133–34).

16. See Bécquer’s “LIII” in Rimas y leyendas (39–40).

17. I owe this insight to two graduate students whom I would like to thank: David Young and Dalton Moss. René de Costa has argued that Temblor de cielo is fundamentally about sexual liberation. See his commentary in Vicente Huidobro: poesía y política (1911–1948), antología comentada por René de Costa (165–66).

18. In “Vicente Huidobro y la literatura social,” David Bary alleges in his study of Huidobro’s narrative and poetry that there was a turn toward commitment from the 1930s on, but he also acknowledges that Huidobro’s worldview was “anarquismo personal y aristocrático” (personal and aristocratic anarchism, 322). Moreover, he concedes that the social poems are a very few with respect to his poetic opus.


Works Cited


Altazor: A New Arrangement

Bruce Dean Willis

La voz que quita el orden lingüístico por el lingual
materializa la inscripción de un cuerpo carnal.
—Saúl Yurkievich

(The voice that replaces the linguistic order with the lingual
materializes the inscription of a carnal body.)

el último gorgoteo del músico,
su trombón anegado por el mar.
—Juan Manuel Roca

(the musician’s final gurgle,
his trombone flooded by the sea.)

When we say that Huidobro’s 1931 masterpiece Altazor is “el fracaso de la Vanguardia” (the failure of the Vanguard), “el poema del fracaso” (the poem of failure), a “dead end,” an “ill-fated odyssey,” or an “attempt failed,” we focus on gradual semantic loss over the course of the long poem, resulting in the inability of the reader, before the end of the final canto, to participate conclusively in the construction of meaning.

This critical interpretation of failure, which has held sway for decades, certainly remains valid in the quite literal sense of the breakdown, in the poem, of writing and reading as a shared decoding of a given set of signifiers whose contextualization, at least ostensibly, provides common ground for meaning. The history of this critique of semantic failure, often conflated with the alleged thematic failure of the seven-canto poem to hold together as one unit, dominates critical attention devoted to the poem’s transformation of language. According to the tenets of creacionismo (Creationism, a movement almost entirely encompassed by Huidobro himself), language transformation serves to: (1) develop a new poetic expression, focusing on the word as the essence and the building block of creation, and (2) then create worlds which are unique and not a reflection of nature (Wood 13–15). René de Costa identifies this
search for an original expression as the only element that unifies the poem.\(^2\)

Guillermo Sucre has elucidated the linguistic “vertigo” of Huidobro’s previously ascendant and confident style, now shown to be a ludic and introspective “metalenguaje, magia verbal” (metalanguage, verbal magic), while de Costa, Lee Dowling, Cecil Wood, and Federico Schopf, among others, have focused on the specific ways in which Huidobro’s games break down the semantic and grammatical systems of the Spanish and French languages. Many critics have studied the poem’s images and metaphors\(^3\); however, few if any have focused on Huidobro’s use of a series of corporeal metaphors to illustrate a decomposition that accompanies and accents the linguistic transformation. In *Altazor*, the image of the mortal human body, which can frustrate the manifestation of the eternal soul, reflects the antagonism of words over the expression of poetry. The mirror that Huidobro constructs between body and language makes the reader aware not only of the flexibility between these two entities, but also of their complementary degenerations. Such added elements remind the reader of the text’s imaginative quality, just as the corporeal lexicon of *Altazor* reminds the reader of the limits of the text’s expression.\(^4\)

Through the voice of *Altazor*, Huidobro explores existential frontiers: the boundaries of being of *Altazor* are equal to the semantic and graphic limitations of *Altazor*.\(^5\) *Altazor*’s quest for his soul does not escape its physical constraints, that is, the body of the poem and the words themselves. *Altazor*, the “high-flying hawk,” has a parachute instead of wings and thus no ability to control his descent. He is poetic expression, locked within a linguistic cage; he is the soul of poetry enclosed by its body of words on a page.

If *Altazor* cannot escape from the constraints of words, then he can at least play at rearranging them. Like many of his contemporaries, Huidobro must have been fascinated by the circumstances of the 1912 *Titanic* shipwreck. He harbored an enthusiasm for polar exploration that must certainly have been stoked by the infamous iceberg, and he himself traveled as a transoceanic passenger on numerous occasions. Aside from a half-dozen references to icebergs in *Altazor*, there are a dozen references to shipwrecks in the poem, and more than two dozen to various kinds of watercraft. The following passage typifies the ambivalent shipwreck contextualization in the poem: “O dadme un bello naufragio verde / Un milagro que ilumine el fondo de nuestros mares íntimos / Como el barco que se hunde sin apagar sus luces” (30–31) (Oh give me a beautiful green shipwreck / A miracle to brighten the depths of our intimate seas / Like a ship that sinks without losing its lights). My motivation for speculating on the shipwreck allusions derives from the cliché for futility, “rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*.” The question becomes whether we interpret *Altazor*’s verbal wizardry as an exercise in (semantic) futility, or something else altogether,
something that could, perhaps, lead to the construction of a life raft made from those very deck chairs. Without disputing the importance of the traditional critical interpretation of the poem as a failure—and I am reminded of Paz’s assessment of Sor Juana’s iconic exaltation of Phaeton in her Primero Sueño (First Dream)—I assert here a more participatory interpretation of Altazor. I wish to highlight musical, anagrammatic, and corporeal aspects of the text relative to the term “arrangement” in order to suggest that Huidobro, quite apart from his obsessive need to pre-date his works, was in fact years ahead of his time.

In the radically experimental milieu of avant-garde Paris, Huidobro engaged the dogmas and doctrines of his contemporaries while staking out his own precarious territory as creacionismo. We know from Huidobro’s manifestos that he condemned the practices of certain other “-ismos” only after having tried them himself; for example, writing the first thing that comes to mind, writing collectively sequential “blind” verse, and arranging poetry made from random newspaper clippings. What was missing from these techniques, he claimed, was the voice of reason, enough reason to balance out pure imagination. In fact throughout his manifestos he expresses the desire for an equilibrium of intellect and emotion, or will and imagination, in order to best achieve the kind of innovative poetry he strived for. But he did not cease to be fascinated by the original image, by that shocking juxtaposition of “palabras enemigas” (enemy words) that was the poet-explorer’s equivalent of planting the flag in unclaimed territory, or the poet-magician’s creation of something completely new from the most ordinary materials. His fundamental conception of the poet as seer, exemplified in “La poesía” (Poetry) and “Las siete palabras del poeta” (The Seven Words of the Poet) among other manifestos, did not waver from the Romantic conceptualization of the artist’s special powers and heightened emotions. But if the poet’s medium is mere language, then he must, Huidobro resolved, play with words not only in juxtaposition but also in decomposition. Essentially, the poet must seek to rearrange, to strive not just for the original image or for the new take on an old theme, but to actually rearrange phonemes and syllables and thus play at the creation of new implied meanings, the abracadabra that casts an unknown spell. “La operación poética no es diversa del conjuro, el hechizo y otros procedimientos de la magia” (Paz, Arco 53) (The poetic process is no different than the spell, the enchantment, and other magical procedures).

The best-known slogan of Huidobro’s creacionismo appears as the last verse of his 1916 “Arte poética”: “El poeta es un pequeño Dios” (The poet is a small God). The poet is a god who destroys to create anew; like Zeus, Shiva, Tezcatlipoca, and numerous other mythological deities, he unleashes the purging, chaotic violence that will set the stage for rebirth. Publio Octavio Romero specifies: “Pero antes de crear hay que destruir, y Altazor
lo [logra] con las armas de la ironía, de la blasfemia, y, en suma, con los recursos del lenguaje. Su crítica tendrá como blanco la cultura de la cual proviene: creencias religiosas, ideologías y posturas estéticas” (148) (But before creation must come destruction, and Altazor [achieves this] with his weapons of irony, blasphemy, and, in sum, with language resources. His critique will have as its target the culture from which it came: religious beliefs, ideologies, and aesthetic posturings). The poet cannot truly create, but wants to surpass Adam’s mere naming to something more akin to Dr. Frankenstein’s “creation” of life by recycling and rearranging. Also like Dr. Frankenstein, he will lose control over his creation, except that in the poet’s case this loss is anticipated in a ludic strategy that engages the reader’s participation. Moreover, the poet does not strive for the re-creation of the phoenix. Rather than an exact replica rising from the flames of its own destruction, the creationist poet must achieve an original form and expression. Within the context of Altazor, the destruction/creation dichotomy adheres on both the linguistic and the corporeal levels in three stages. First, the rage of annihilation is called for in the beginning of the poem as a kind of cathartic cure for the rigidity of expression that has limited poetry up to this point (Prefacio, Cantos I–III). Next, the poet plays language games in the body of the poem itself that undermine the semantic and grammatical systems of the poet’s mother tongue (Cantos IV and V). Finally, language is entirely deconstructed, yielding the paradoxical result of an expression at last free and uninhibited, but also unintelligible (Cantos VI and VII). Metaphors of bodily and musical decomposition reinforce each of the three stages.

**The Call for Renewal**

The commencement of the poem (in the Prefacio) coincides with the birth of Altazor: “Nací a los treinta y tres años, el día de la muerte de Cristo; nací en el Equinoccio, bajo las hortensias y los aeroplanos del calor” (2–3) (I was born at the age of 33 on the day Christ died; I was born at the Equinox, under the hydrangeas and the aeroplanes in the heat). Immediately the antithesis of birth is named: “Y ahora mi paracaídas cae de sueño en sueño por los espacios de la muerte” (2–3) (And now my parachute drops from dream to dream through the spaces of death). Altazor’s fall leads him to death through the gradual decomposition of the language; in the beginning, the language is “cargado de contenido, de información, de ideología” (full of content, of information, of ideology) but at the end of the poem it is purely “una mera armonización sonora” (Yurkievich, Nueva 84) (a merely sonorous harmonization).
The poet condemns linguistic communication from the start because it is unnatural. The Creator tells Altazor: “Creé la lengua de la boca que los hombres desviaron de su rol, haciéndola aprender a hablar . . . a ella, ella, la bella nadadora, desviada para siempre de su rol acuático y puramente acariciador” (4–5) (I created the tongue of the mouth which man diverted from its role to make it learn to speak . . . to her, to her, the beautiful swimmer, forever diverted from her aquatic and purely sensual role). The paradox of the poem, however, is that as a text it would not exist without language; from this contradiction comes the desire to destroy formal language and create a simpler, more primitive form for the soul’s expression. In addition to the tongue, other body parts encapsulate the unsatisfactory language system: “Anda en mi cerebro una gramática dolorosa y brutal / [. . . ] / Lo que se esconde en las frías regiones de lo invisible / O en la ardiente tempestad de nuestro cráneo” (28–29) (A brutal painful grammar walks through my brain / [. . . ] / Hidden in the freezing regions of the invisible / Or the burning storms of our brains). Even after acknowledging the potency of some words—“que tienen sombra de árbol” (that have the shade of trees), “vocablos que tienen fuego de rayos” (words with rays of fire), “palabras con imanes que atraen los tesoros del abismo” (words with magnets that attract the treasures of the deep)—the poet warns: “Altazor desconfía de las palabras / Desconfía del ardid ceremonioso / Y de la poesía / Trampas” (46–47) (Don’t trust words Altazor / Don’t trust ceremonious artifice / And poetry / Traps). This criticism includes, necessarily, the very poem that expresses it.

The poet has not yet escaped from his cage: “Soy yo Altazor / Altazor / Encerrado en la jaula de su destino” (16–17) (Altazor am I / Altazor / Trapped in the prison of his fate). This “jaula” is both his human body, the physical entity that contains his soul, and the text of words in the poem. The decaying body controls the expression of his soul just as the words restrict the poetic expression: “Voy pegado a mi muerte / Voy por la vida pegado a mi muerte / Apoyado en el bastón de mi esqueleto” (34–35) (I go on stuck to my death / I go on through life stuck to my death / Leaning on the cane of my skeleton). Here he demonstrates the antithesis of life and death: the soul, which grows and expands with the passing of time, is supported by the body’s frame (“esqueleto”), which gradually loses its vitality. His corporeality is also an empty cave: “El viento que se enreda en tu voz / Y la noche que tiene frío en su gruta de huesos” (14–15) (The wind tangled in your voice / And the night freezing in its cave of bones).

The corporeal frustration manifests itself in sickness and pain: “Se me cae el dolor de la lengua y las alas marchitas / Se me caen los dedos muertos uno a uno / [. . . ] / Me duelen los pies como ríos de piedra” (24–25, 26–27) (Pain falls from my tongue and my clipped wings / One by one my dead fingers fall off / [. . . ] / My feet hurt like stony rivers). Injury is introduced
with the repetition of forms of the word “herida” (wound) characterizing the first canto: “El hombre herido por quién sabe quien / Por una flecha perdida del caos” (32–33) (The man wounded by who knows what / By an arrow lost in the chaos), “Cuando veas como una herida profetiza / Y reconozcas la carne desgraciada” (46–47) (When you see like a prophetic wound / And recognize the hapless flesh). In resolution, Altazor proposes the destruction of the body to liberate the soul: “Quememos nuestra carne en los ojos del alba / Bebamos la tímida lucidez de la muerte / La lucidez polar de la muerte” (22–23) ([We must] Burn our flesh in the eyes of dawn / Drink the pale lucidity of death / The polar lucidity of death). He also suggests “Que se rompa el andamio de los huesos / Que se derrumben las vigas del cerebro” (26–27) (Smash the scaffold of the bones / Pull down the rafters of the brain) and “Romper las ligaduras de las venas” (66–67) (Break the loops of veins).

The preparation for this act of breaking the existing molds is implied in references to bodily cleanliness and order; Altazor’s bath washes away the old semantic and linguistic associations, leaving him with fresh flesh to start anew. This is the first step in the creation of his new poetic context:

Tengo tanta necesidad de ternura, besa mis cabellos, los he lavado esta mañana en las nubes del alba y ahora quiero dormirme sobre el colchón de la neblina intermitente. (6–7)

(I have a need for tenderness, kiss my hair, I washed it this morning in clouds of dawn, and now I want to sleep on the mattress of occasional drizzle.)

Lava sus manos en la mirada de Dios, y peina su cabellera como la luz y la cosecha de esas flacas espigas de la lluvia satisfecha. (8–9)

(He washes his hands in the glances of God, and combs his hair like the light, like the harvest of those thin grains of satisfied rain.)

Washing hands is a traditional way of disassociating oneself from an unpleasant matter; in this way the poet breaks ties with the old grammar. Altazor invites the reader to create a new world, but first it is necessary to forget the old one: “A la hora en que las flores se lavan la cara / Y los últimos sueños huyen por las ventanas” (48–49) (At the hour when the flowers wash their faces / And the last dreams escape through the windows).

Before he can move on, however, Altazor lingers and flirts with the old language and the old body in the second canto, an ode to woman He glorifies the parts of her body in a section similar to modernista love poetry, but much more cosmic, reflecting Huidobro’s shift away from the renovated romantic style. Furthermore, this section exemplifies the poet’s view of a particular essence as a collection of separate parts: a corporeal synecdoche.
Here the woman symbolizes all the moving power of poetry (and language) as we know it:

Tu voz hace un imperio en el espacio
Y esa mano que se levanta en ti como si fuera a colgar soles en el aire
Y ese mirar que escribe mundos en el infinito
Y esa cabeza que se dobla para escuchar un murmullo en la eternidad
Y ese pie que es la fiesta de los caminos encadenados
Y esos párpados donde viene a vararse las centellas del éter
Y ese beso que hincha la proa de tus labios
Y esa sonrisa como un estandarte al frente de tu vida
Y ese secreto que dirige las mareas de tu pecho
Dormido a la sombra de tus senos. (62–63, 64–65)

(Your voice creates an empire in space
And that hand reaching up as if it were hanging suns in the air
And that glance writing worlds in the infinite
And that head bending forward to listen to the murmur of eternity
And that foot that is a festival for the hobbled roads
And those eyelids where the lightning bolts of the aether run aground
And that kiss that swells the bow of your lips
And that smile like a banner before your life
And that secret that moves the tides of your chest
Asleep in the shade of your breasts.)

Yet the poet is not fully enchanted. According to Wood, “since she was not eternal, she could not give eternity. It was therefore impossible for her to provide a solution to man’s problems. The poet sees her and himself as sharing the same destiny” (202). Thus the poet warns: “Sin embargo te advierto que estamos cosidos / A la misma estrella / Estamos cosidos por la misma música tendida / De uno a otro / Por la misma sombra gigante agitada como árbol” (56–57) (And yet I warn you we are sewn / To the same star / We are sewn by the same music stretching / From one to the other / By the same huge shadow shaking like a tree). The woman’s role is not seen as a “solution, but only as a solace or companion in the search for it,” Wood clarifies (202). She is the poetic muse: “Y al fondo de ti misma recuerdas que eras tú / El pájaro de antaño en la clave del poeta” (60–61) (And at the bottom of your self you recall what you were / The bird of yesteryear in the poet’s key). Poet and poetry are in the same boat; they have not yet reached an eternal expression, and must unite, both spiritually and physically, to achieve that goal. Mandlove notes that the male and female identities are drawn together in the canto in the act of creation; only together can they engender a new poetry. Their sexual union is only implied, yet it is another corporeal reference that echoes the idea of textual creation in the body of the poem itself.
In the third canto, Altazor derides the traditional poet as a “Manicura de la lengua” (68–69) (manicurist of language), a title not of “one who creates but of one who polishes” (Wood 205). In this instance, the association of language with the body is again a reference to the poet’s disappointment with previous poetic styles. While it is true that the language can be made beautiful, such beauty is artificial and pejorative. Huidobro explicitly contrasts the manicurists’ subdued polishing with the more violent verbs that the creationist poet must use in his treatment of language, i.e. “romper” (to break), “cortar” (to cut), and “sangrar” (to bleed). He calls for the end: “Matemos al poeta que nos tiene saturados / [...] / Poesía / Demasiada poesía / Desde el arco-iris hasta el culo pianista de la vecina / Basta señora poesía bambina” (70–71) (Let us kill the poet who gluts us / [...] / Poetry / Too much poetry / From the rainbow to the piano-bench ass of the lady next door / Enough poetry bambina enough lady). Poetry is exhaustive and even vulgar; once more a corporeal allusion, the appropriately ribald “culo” (ass), pejoratively associates body and language. The extended simile that immediately follows this section is a further example of exhaustion, devised by the poet to show the limitations of poetic possibilities (Wood 205).

Sabemos posar un beso como una mirada
Plantar miradas como árboles
Enjaular árboles como pájaros
Regar pájaros como heliotropes. (70–71)

(We already know how to dart a kiss like a glance
Plant glances like trees
Cage trees like birds
Water birds like heliotropes.)

The chain continues for thirty-six verses, a redundant parody of the caged (“enjaular”) control of the modernista metaphoric style. It is an orgy of word couplings in which Huidobro creates innovative images by stretching or violating semantic limitations.

**Structural Violations**

With the slogan “Mientras vivamos juguemos / El simple sport de los vocablos” (74–75) (As long as we live let us play / The simple sport of words) begins the ludic manipulation of words in Canto IV. The bodies of the words are transforming, and likewise the physical bodies that the word-images stand for begin to change. “El nuevo atleta” (the new athlete) replaces “el último poeta” (the last poet)—we see the athlete “Jugando con magnéticas palabras / Caldeadas como la tierra cuando va a salir un volcán /
Lanzando sortilegios de sus frases pájaro” (72–73) (Frolicking with magnetic words / Hot as the earth when a volcano rises / Hurling the sorceries of his Bird phrases). The image of the athlete, with his strong, well-developed body, symbolizes a new language that will strive, like the athlete, for the perfection of its form, and consequently, expression. Moreover, the poet has declared that “Todas las lenguas están muertas” (both “languages” and “tongues;” Weinberger resolves for “All the languages are dead” and alternates below) and “Hay que resucitar las lenguas” (We must revive the languages) with

Fuegos de risa para el lenguaje tiritando de frío
Gimnasia astrol para las lenguas entumecidas
Levántate y anda
Vive vive como un balón de fútbol. (74–75)

(Fires of laughter for the shivering language
Astral gymnastics for the numb tongues
Get up and walk
Live live like a soccer ball.)

Language is a body here that can feel the effects of cold. The third verse of this passage, the phrase Jesus spoke to Lazarus, the man whom he brought back from death, highlights the idea of a corporeal and linguistic resurrection (John 11:1–44).

The Spanish “Lázaro” (Lazarus) is only one letter short of being an anagram of “Altazor.” Anagrams allow for semantic reassignment in a way that suggests that one meaning is inherent in the other, just as one spelling is derived from the other. They represent a vestigial, superstitious assumption that rearranged letters can change meaning but also, somehow, circumscribe meaning within the anagrams of its signifier. Many writers exploit anagrammatic associations; in the case of Altazor, the anagram with Lázaro emphasizes Huidobro’s insistence on resuscitating language throughout the poem.

In a re-enactment of the biblical scene, the well-known line “Levántate y anda” (Get up and walk) is repeated by the protagonist of the 1927 novela-film Cagliostro, a text Huidobro was composing during the same period as Altazor.

—Levántate y anda. Levántate y anda, nuevo Lázaro, mi Lázaro.
La voz de Cagliostro es enérgica y a su llamado una bandada de ecos milenarios parece
animarse y venir de algún punto lejano perdido en los fondos de la historia y de la geografía.
El joven enfermo se anima, trata de encontrarse adentro de su cuerpo, sus movimientos se
hacen más precisos.
—Levántate y anda... Te ordeno que te levantes.
El aire de la sala vibra y brilla cargado de electricidad como un diamante. El milagro
suspende su estrella sobre las cabezas.
[...]
El enfermo da algunos pasos temblorosos y cae sobre el pecho del mago, que lo
estrecha
tieramente, mientras la madre se arroja de rodillas a sus pies besando el borde de
sus vestidos. (57)

(Arise and walk! Arise and walk, new Lazarus—my Lazarus! Ringing was the voice of Cagliostro, and at his summons a swarm of echoes
millenary seemed to awaken and return to life from some far-distant place, lost in the depths of history and geography.
The sick youth revived; he sought to rally himself within his frame; his
movements grew stronger.
Arise and walk! I command you to arise.
Charged with electric force, the air of the room thrilled and sparkled like a
diamond. The star of miracle hung above their heads.
Arise! Arise, I say—arise!
[...]
Trembling, the youth now healed took a few paces forward, and fell upon the
breast of the mage, who embraced him tenderly. His mother threw herself upon
her knees at the feet of the mage, kissing the hem of his garment.)

“Altazor” is also a slightly imperfect anagram (one missing phoneme) of
“Althotas,” the name of Cagliostro’s alchemical maestro as revealed in the
opening scene’s clandestine ceremony. What results is a slightly shifting
onomastic arrangement, ALTHOTAS—ALTAZOR—LAZARO, a
caballistic semantic series suggesting alchemy, magic, and resurrection.
Such are the goals of Altazor: to make literary gold from banal dross, to
create new reality from words, and to breathe new life into moribund
morphemes.11 The assignment of a caballistic series of names springs from
Huidobro’s own declared interest in such topics. In Vientos contrarios
(1926), among other texts, he glosses his hours of study relegated to “la
Astrología, a la Alquimia, a la Cábala antigua y al ocultismo en general”
(Obras Completas I 794) (Astrology, Alchemy, the ancient Cabbala and the
occult in general).

Additionally, the iconic “Levántate y anda” introduces rising motion
into the prolonged descent that is Altazor, o El viaje en paracaidas. With
this phrase, and several others like it, Huidobro successfully dissuades
gravity, however momentarily, and balances linguistic breakdown with
linguistic germination, decomposition with composition. In passages where
he introduces a riff like “La montaña y el montañito / Con su luno y con su luna” (106–07) (The mountain and the moontain / with her moon and his moun), linguistic destruction (in this case, gender) can be somewhat detained by the suggestive possibilities of the creation that arises from it. The reader is still falling down the page with Altazor, yet, on an updraft, admiring the view from the alturas (heights) that Huidobro repeatedly associated with poetic potency in his Manifiestos (Willis 96). Similarly, the reader’s descent decelerates as he or she is bandied about by the whirling arms of the ever-changing molino (mill) while turning the six pages of its rhyming semantic innovations (see below).

The following section focuses on the eye, “precioso regalo del cerebro” (80–81) (precious gift of the brain), and includes thirteen verses with the word “ojo” (eye) in conjunction with varying nouns: “Ojo árbol / Ojo pájaro / Ojo río / Ojo montaña / Ojo mar” (80–81) (Treeeye / Birdeye / Rivereye / Mountaineye / Seaeye). While it is certainly true that these are novel pairings, it is more to the point that they lend a new function to the idea of “ojo.” This function, within the immediate context, must be considered in terms of both meaning and appearance. First, both the word “ojo” and, by extension, its signified body part, acquire new meaning in the expanding semantic context of the poem. These new meanings cannot be easily extracted from the context; it is better to recognize multiple possibilities such as “look,” “watch out,” “see,” “insight,” “vision,” etc., possibilities that pervade the entire poem beyond these specific verses. The words paired with “ojo” also assume new meanings in the context, creating something like a landscape that both sees and is seen. Second, the repetition of the word “ojo” on the page reinforces the word’s physical form, which visually resembles a pair of eyes and a nose. The importance of words’ visual appearance cannot be understated; it is a function with which Huidobro had experimented earlier, for instance in the 1913 “Nipona.” And the celerity of these verses suggests, as in many other aspects of the poem, the impact of film in the arts in general and on Huidobro, who won a prize in New York from the League for Better Pictures for that never-made silent film Cagliostro.

In two passages beginning respectively with “Vaya por los globos y los cocodrilos mojados” (82–83) (Travel the worlds and the wet crocodiles) and “Noche, préstame tu mujer con pantorrillas de florero de amapolas jóvenes” (84–85) (Night, lend me your woman with calves of a flowerpot of young poppies), the poet scrambles the words of the first section to create the second. Semantic limitations have thus been totally ignored. Immediately between the two scrambled sections, the poet hints at what is taking place in his mixture of meanings: “Rosa al revés rosa otra vez y rosa rosa / Aunque no quiera el carcelero / Río revuelto para la pesca milagrosa” (84–85) (Rose upturned and rose returned and rose and rose / Though the warden don’t want it / Muddy rivers make for clean fishing). Here Huidobro builds on the
A motif of the “jaula” (jail)—the “carcelero” (warden) is meaning or definition, that which restricts the words semantically.

Periodically the poetic voice plays against the downward trajectory of Altazor through uplifting musical interludes, little compositions that stall the grand decomposition. The best known of these is the nightingale scale, the “rodoñol, rotrerñol,” (90–91, my emphasis) (nightdongale, nightrefgale) up through mi, fa, sol, la, and si. The most cherished of songbirds, the nightingale as signifier is transformed here into a seven-note exercise suggesting the song of its signified. Cellos, violins, pianos, arpeggios and other musical images abound in the poem, further supporting a reading of the text as arrangement in the sense of a new casting of an already established melody. In the nightingale series, Huidobro follows the ascendant scale to make his point, but in doing so infers that phonemes or syllables—“sílabas que son sonajas que son semillas” (Paz, “Decir” 12) (syllables that are rattles that are seeds)—can be rearranged and sequenced in the same way that musical notes can be. Indeed, this practice is observed in the later cantos where syllabic rearrangement is accompanied by visual experimentation, approximating even more closely the two functions of printed notes on a musical staff (position and duration). The relationship with music should also lead us to ponder the great, unfulfilled fantasy of writers throughout history and geography, especially the vanguard writers: a truly universal language, what Vicky Unruh has described as “prior to all time [that] intimates a universality of human experience and emotion somehow divested of the historical and cultural accretions that shape actual languages in real-life worlds” (221). This is the ur-language that leads writers to enviously behold music’s transcendence without translation. As we drop vertiginously through the cantos, especially the last two, we begin to see letters grouped as words but recognizable only as vocalizations. Altazor’s nonsensical noises, “i i o / Ai a i ai a i i o ia” (150–51) (ee ee oh / Ahee ah ee aheeh ah ee ee ee oo eeh), could just as likely come from the cradle as from the deathbed, or maybe even from the futile maneuverings of Roca’s musician aboard the Titanic, “su trombón anegado por el mar” (epigraph) (his trombone flooded by the sea). To arrive at that truly universal language, the writer must seemingly sacrifice meaning completely, thus drifting into the realm of music and, ultimately, into a dissolution back into the sea / the womb / the semiotic chora of pre-linguistic mysteries.

Resembling Mariano Brull’s “jitanjáforas,” wordplay in the poem continues with changing syllables and endings (Dowling 253; Unruh 217). In fragments such as the ones with “golondrina / golonfina / golontrina / goloncima” (88–89) (swooping swallow / whopping wallow / weeping wellow / sweeping shrillow) and “meteoro / meteplata / meteocobre / meteópalos” (94–95) (meteoroid / meteojoid / meteovoids / meteonoid),
there is only one part of the word that changes. The next step is seen in the phrase “horitaña de la montazonte” (88–89) (horslope of the hillizon), in which the words interchange their endings, exploiting the fact that in a fictitious world the description of an object, even by merely naming it, gives existence to that object (Waugh 93). It is not essential to know exactly what a “golontrina” is or what the palindrome “eterfinifrete” (98–99) (infinernity) means; their printed presence on the page is enough to confirm their existence. In the poem’s context, these words do not need concrete definitions; through the sound and the appearance of the words the reader can imply a meaning by recognizing their hybrid quality. The juxtaposition of “golondrina” (swallow) and “trinar” (to warble), or “eterno” (eternal) and “infinito” (infinite), is a linguistic chimera, a fusion of parts from different words, which will be reflected in the culminating image of “la medusa irreparable” (146–47) (Ruined Medusa), the mixture of disparate parts of distinct bodies.

The poetic voice alters the formation of familiar terms: “Entonces yo sólo digo / Que no compro estrellas de la nochería / Y tampoco olas nuevas en la marería” (90–91) (Then I can only say / That I don’t buy stars at the nightery / Or new waves at the seastore). By inserting this mosaic of invented and combined words in a context of normal words, Huidobro displays both the control of the author over his own creation (the poem) and also the arbitrariness of the words themselves. This arbitrary quality stands out especially in names (Waugh 93–94).

Aquí yace Rosario río de rosas hasta el infinito
Aquí yace Raimundo raíces del mundo son sus venas
Aquí yace Clarisa clara risa enclaustrada en la luz
Aquí yace Alejandro antro alejado ala adentro. (94–95)

(Here lies Rosemary rose carried to the infinite
Here lies Raymond rays of mud his veins
Here lies Clarissa clear is her smile encloistered in the light
Here lies Alexander alas under all is yonder.)

In this passage, as he breaks the names to reveal their components, the forensic poet (“Aquí yace Altazor azor fulminado por la altura / Aquí yace Vicente antipoeta y mago” / “Here lies Altazor hawk exploded by the altitude / Here lies Vicente anti-poet and magician”) also dehumanizes the people that the names represent with his alliterative enumeration of them as dead ones; they are nothing more than names. Evocative of the Lázaro anagram, these onomastic pseudo-etymologies exemplify rearrangement as well as semantic reinscription. At the same time, the breaking apart of each name imitates, in a corporeal sense, the decomposition of a cadaver.
The acquisition of new functions for words is also shown by what Dowling calls a “syntactic innovation” (261): “La cascada que cabellera sobre la noche / Mientras la noche se cama a descansar / Con su luna que almohada el cielo / Yo ojo el paisaje cansado” (128–29) (The waterfall tresses over the night / While the night beds to rest / With its moon that pillows the sky / I iris the sleepy land). Words that are usually nouns (in Spanish) function as verbs in this passage. It is not insignificant that two of these four verses display body parts acting as verbs, while the other two have body-related nouns—“cama” (bed) and “almohada” (pillow)—as verbs; again, structure and function couple in the changing context of both body and language. In addition, the creation of masculine counterparts for feminine words (in Spanish) lends the terms a corporeal connotation of androgyny: “La montaña y el montaño / Con su luno y con su luna” (106–07) (The mountain and the moontain / with her moon and his moun). Dowling claims that “Huidobro alters the gender of [the] nouns” (260); it is no exaggeration to say that the poet eventually desires to destroy gender completely, again robbing the poem’s mother tongue of a semantic system.

In the fifth canto, with a recapitulation of the call for cleanliness, Huidobro then introduces the direct substitution of one body for another, one word for another. First he sets up the parallels and then he substitutes:

Nos frotamos las manos y reímos
Nos lavamos los ojos y jugamos
El horizonte es un rinoceronte
El mar un azar
El cielo un pañuelo
La llaga una plaga
Un horizonte jugando a todo mar se soñaba con el cielo después de las siete llagas de Egipto. (112–13)

(We rub our hands and laugh
We wash our hands and play along
The horizon’s a bison
The ocean devotion
Heaven a hanky
The page a plague
A horizon filled with the ocean blew its nose on the heavens after the seven pages of Egypt.)

He also shows us the evolution or continual change of one body—a windmill—into other bodies. The mill itself is a symbol of change because it is always turning, like the wheel of fortune, and because it is associated with Don Quixote’s fantastic giant who, it will be remembered, was turned back into a windmill by the evil magician, according to the addled don’s assessment. Huidobro’s “Molino de viento” (Windmill station) becomes a
“Molino de aumento [ . . . ] del lamento [ . . . ] con amordazamiento” (114–121) (Mill of proliferation [ . . . ] of the lamentation [ . . . ] with expurgation) etc. With the repetition of words for the effect of their sounds much more than their meanings, the poet displays his arbitrary control again. Also, the six pages of the “molino” metamorphosis, with long, unbroken word columns, physically resemble a windmill’s arms as they are turned and therefore, once again, emphasize the physical appearance of words as a unique aspect of their composition (Dowling 262).

As he approaches death, Altazor begins to fragment himself: “Y he aquí que ahora me diluyo en múltiples cosas / Soy luciérnaga y voy iluminando las ramas de la selva / [. . .] / Y luego soy árbol / [. . .] / Y ahora soy mar / Pero guardo algo de mis modos de volcán / De mis modos de árbol de mis modos de luciérnaga / De mis modos de pájaro de hombre y de rosal” (128–31) (And here I must dissolve myself into many things / I’m a firefly lighting the forest branches / [. . .] / And then I’m a tree / [. . .] / And now I’m the sea / But I keep to my volcano ways / My tree ways my firefly ways / My bird and man and rosebush ways). Like the anagrams that conserve mutual meaning, one spelling containing the other without ceasing to offer its own signification, the poetic voice can assume here concentric ontologies springing from an assumed linguistic identity. The consequent dissolution of Altazor’s being coincides with the similar breakdown of the language, which already occurs in the context of newly created words: “Empiece ya / La faranmandó mandó líná / Con su musiquí con su musicá” (126–27) (Crank it up / The faranmandole that manned a linn / With its musicoo with its musical). This breakdown is also found in the disorder and fatigue of Altazor’s body: “El viento norte despeina tus cabellos” (124–25) (The north wind rumples your hair) and “los brazos [. . .] fatigados por el huracán” (126–27) (arms [. . .] worn down by hurricanes); he wants to laugh “antes que venga la fatiga” (128–29) (before weariness comes). Altazor’s bodily symptoms foreshadow the collapse of language that soon follows.

The Death of Meaning

In Canto VI everything falls into confusion, mixing with itself. The prognostic “el clarín de la Babel” (140–41) (the bugle of Babel) evokes Old Testament cacophonous confusion, at the same time that “la medusa irreparable” (146–47) (Ruined Medusa) alludes to mythological mayhem, a wretched recipe of woman and snake. The parts of the Medusa, randomly assembled and “irreparable” (ruined), disintegrate: “Olvidando la serpiente / Olvidando sus dos piernas / Sus dos ojos / Sus dos manos / Sus orejas” (146–47) (Forgetting the serpent / Forgetting its two legs / Its two eyes / Its two hands / Its ears). Indeed, the very verses of the sixth canto seem to fall
apart on the page, imitating the descent of a feather, or a rock bouncing off
canyon walls, or perhaps a sinking ship:

En su oreja

Cristal mío
Baño eterno
El gloria trino

viento norte
el nudo noche
sin desmayo. (146–47)

(In its ear
My crystal
Bath eternal

north wind
night knot

without dismay.)

In the final canto, Altazor sings in a babbling voice no longer
understandable: “Olamina olasica lalilá / Isonauta / Olandera
uruaru / Ia ia
campanuso compasedo” (148–49) (Roceaning tradoean laelela / Equinaut /
Banneocean raruckoo / Eeah eeah campanily acompasssee). This new lexicon
seems to be based on Spanish, and therefore it still has a context within the
gradual disintegration of the poem; however, the death of meaning has
already occurred: the word is only its resonance and its appearance.

To reach the end of the poem is to arrive at the bottom of the abyss in
which Altazor has fallen. The “jaula” exists no longer, neither the cage of
flesh and bone nor the cage of subject and verb. The verses have diminished
from being full, long sentences in the Prefacio to short phrases in Cantos IV
and V, to small word groups in Canto VI and finally, in Canto VII, to
grouped syllables, first with consonants and then only vowels. The poet has
entered, in Paz’s words, “al borde del lenguaje” (on the edge of language),
the essential zone of existence that is replete with both life and death (Arco
147–48). It is a pure existence; words do not betray with their connotations.

In the end, Altazor has both died and been reborn. He has completed the
metamorphosis of his soul into a language/body that is simple and
expressive, and he has won the challenge that he proposed before—“el
simple sport de los vocablos” (74–75) (the simple sport of words). But by
winning he has fallen into the silence that is the absence of expression; the
“medusa irreparable” signified that the abnormal possibilities, the confused
chimeras, have been exhausted. The fundamental dialogue of any work of
art, which is participation with the reader or observer, has been
compromised. With the absence of meaning inherent in the final freedom of
expression, the reader no longer has a basis for understanding. It is the
culminating demonstration of the paradox; by attempting the absolute expression of the soul, the poet loses the ability for that expression to be shared and evaluated. Huidobro has manifested what Paz described: “La experiencia de la caída en el caos es indecible” (Arco 150) (The experience of the fall into chaos is untellable). Falling into the chaos is the same as going back to the beginning when, biblically, there was only the Word. The Word is the very absence of words; it is silence.

By way of conclusion, I return to elaborate on the almost unanimous traditional critical opinions given at the beginning of this essay. Pedro Aullón de Haro proclaims that Altazor is a poem “cuyo proyecto, finalmente fracasado, no es más que el fracaso de la Vanguardia, de una vanguardia huidobriana empeñada en el ideal de la transcendencia más allá del propio lenguaje” (58) (whose project, finally failed, is no more than the failure of the Vanguard, of a Huidobrian vanguard insistent on the ideal of transcendence beyond language itself). Guillermo Sucre clarifies:

*Altazor* no es un poema fracasado, sino, lo que es muy distinto, el poema del fracaso. Insisto: no sobre sino del fracaso; no es un comentario alrededor del fracaso, sino su presencia misma. Uno de sus valores (y de sus riesgos, por supuesto) reside en este hecho: haber ilustrado con su escritura misma la desmesura y la imposibilidad de una aspiración de absoluto. (122)

*(Altazor* is not a failed poem, but rather, and this is quite different: the poem of failure. I insist: not about but of failure; it is not a commentary about failure but rather its very presence. One of its values (and its risks, of course) resides in this fact: to have illustrated through its own writing the excess and the impossibility of an aspiration for the absolute.)

Similarly, René de Costa elucidates that, shortly before the publication of *Altazor*, a popular theory describing Rimbaud’s search for a new poetic language as a “fracaso” (failure) prompted Huidobro himself to reply to a colleague: “‘Respecto a lo de artista fracasado es posible que tenga Ud. razón [pero] en mi fracaso voy junto con Rimbaud y Lautréamont’” (24) (Regarding this bit about the failed artist, it’s possible you’re right [but] in my failure I accompany Rimbaud and Lautréamont).

These judgments of the poem are inevitably linked to the goal of creationism; in his quest to find an original expression, Huidobro has in fact attempted to combine artistic form with artistic content in perfect union. In the struggle to do so, however, both form and content have been reduced such that they are no longer recognizable, even nonexistent. Altazor has reached death at the bottom of the fall; his body, like artistic form, has died and his soul, like content, has escaped to someplace beyond perception. Participation, the very base of artistic expression, has also collapsed into the abyss, leaving the reader with only silence and blank space.
It is in this silence, nonetheless, that a new creation is implied. Huidobro alludes to such a silence—a pregnant pause—in the first canto: “Silencio la tierra va a dar a luz un árbol” (50–51) (Silence the earth will give birth to a tree). The tree, of course, symbolizes creation, just as the silence represents the biblical Word. To consider the poem as a “fracaso” is to deny that death’s finality offers a double perspective: it may be true that the death of the body robs the soul of its expression, or it may be the case that the body’s death endows the soul with an infinite range of expression, lending it the newness of a creation liberated by the violent destruction of its previous home, the body. It is precisely this ambiguity of the outcome that allows Altazor’s frustrated expression to be viewed not as a failure but rather as simply what it is: a frustration, an impasse.

The metalanguage of Altazor, composed over some twelve years during the heart of the avant-garde period, is the process of creacionismo. The poem’s original orchestration of word parts and body parts, in a play of composition and decomposition, fixes the reader’s attention on the limitations of expression and existence; the word is then reduced to its most essential qualities—sound and appearance—in order to create a new world or body of expression. The eventual dissipation of the poetic sound into silence, and also the disappearance of the poetic body into blank space, displays the frustration of achieving the original poetic expression that is desired in creationism. The paradox of poetry, as dependent on language and yet desiring to escape its limitations, expands to represent all art as the expression of what it is to be human, to feel the imbalance of a spirit yearning for freedom lodged in an imperfect body perpetually falling toward death.

The numerous ways in which Huidobro’s vision, in Altazor, was years ahead of his time expand in scope beyond this essay. To note just a few influences: Mireya Camurati identifies Huidobro as a precursor for the Brazilian Noigandres group of concretist poets; as early as 1957, Haroldo de Campos wrote an essay on Altazor (193–204). Some of the Brazilian concretists, fifty years after they began their movement, now maintain websites with interactive poetry in which one can rearrange words, not unlike the popular Magnetic Poetry™ refrigerator game: a virtual legacy of Huidobro’s experimentation in Altazor with interchangeable nouns, gender, syllables, and phonemes. Huidobro’s compatriot Nicanor Parra, who took up the mantle of “antipoeta” (antipoet) from Altazor and expanded the concept in his famous “antipoemas” (antipoems), maintains an interactive website featuring his “paRRafrafrases” (paRRaphrases) and the search for a key that will open a “paRRacaidas” (paRRachute). For the 2003 reissue of his English-language version of Altazor cited throughout this text, Eliot Weinberger chose to retranslate from the original, stressing that the poem, like a game, can always yield new results (Weinberger xii). Although
Huidobro criticized blind chance, completely random pairings, and the surrealists’ “automatic writing” when creating poetry, he loved shuffling the deck (chairs) in search of new combinations. In the end, this is Altazor’s inheritance: to search for new life in language, even when sinking toward death; to bravely hoist your trombone and improvise beyond the soaked sheet music, though the lifeboats have already dispersed. Altazor’s linguistic body, composed in pieces to be arranged and shuffled and rearranged again, is Huidobro’s greatest legacy.

Notes

1. These descriptions are from Aullón de Haro (58), Sucre (122), de Costa (The Careers of a Poet 157), Unruh (218), and Shaw (3) respectively. Translations other than Altazor in English (Weinberger’s 2003 edition) and Cagliostro in English (Mirror of a Mage) are my own.

2. See his chapter on Altazor in Vicente Huidobro: The Careers of a Poet (137–61). De Costa elucidates the differences in composition between each canto.


4. This approximates the metalinguistic technique that a novelist uses, for example, upon including prologues, marginal notes, and letters to the editor to expose the physical framework of the text (Waugh 97).

5. Pedro Aullón de Haro describes the ambiguous relationship between Huidobro’s poetic voice and the poem’s protagonist: “Altazor, que al estilo romántico es el doble de Huidobro y, ambivalentemente, sujeto narrador y sujeto narrativo de segunda persona, es el enviado, el mago, el poeta, pero como antipoeta negador del concepto de poeta existente para crear el poeta del futuro, lo cual, como otros varios puntos, se especifica de diversa forma a lo largo del texto” (Altazor, who in romantic style is the double of Huidobro and, ambivalently, narrating subject and second-person narrated subject, is the envoy, the magician, the poet, but as an antipoet who negates the concept of the existing poet in order to create the poet of the future, specified, like several other points, variously throughout the text).

6. In Sor Juana, o Las trampas de la fe (Sor Juana, or The Traps of Faith), Paz claims that what draws Sor Juana to Phaeton—a key allusion in Primero Sueño (First Dream) as well as in her sonnet “Si los riesgos del mar considerara” (If the risks of the ocean were considered)—is his having died precisely in his attempt to try something new. Paz also asserts that the kind of intellectual inquiry Sor Juana makes in her long poem is engaged centuries later in Altazor (380–86).

7. For a detailed analysis of Huidobro’s manifestos, see my Aesthetics of Equilibrium.

8. The biblical reference to Pontius Pilate’s hand-washing is Matthew 27: 24.

9. The contrast appears to similar effect in the 1919 poem “Vulgivaga” by Huidobro’s Brazilian contemporary Manuel Bandeira.

10. For example, when we learn that the name of nineteenth-century Brazilian novelist José de Alencar’s Indianist protagonist, “Iracema,” is an anagram of “America,” it serves to highlight the allegorical reading of the telluric qualities her character represents.
11. We know that an earlier rendition of the name, in one of the textual fragments published in French in the 1920s, was “Altazar.” The “o” in “Altazor” became definitive, giving rise to the numerous associations made to the semantic sense of a “high-flying hawk.” Only with the “o,” however, does the anagram to Lázaro become apparent. Weinberger speculates an anagrammatic relation to Alastor, a long poem by Shelley (xi).

12. See Dowling (256–58).

13. See Romero (153–56) for a mystical interpretation of the nightingale.

14. Quiroga specifies that in Latin America particularly, “the desire for this perfect symbiosis [of sound and sense] is related to the longing for an original language, the repository of all perfect meaning, somehow grafted onto or under Spanish” (165).

15. Temblor de cielo (Skyquake), also published in 1931 though apparently of a more concentrated composition time, is a prose text less exuberant than Altazor in which the narrative voice can ask, “¿Por qué nos empeñamos en resucitar nuestros muertos? Ellos nos impiden ver la idea que nace” (144) (Why do we insist on resuscitating our dead? They impede us from seeing the idea being born). The focus has shifted, in this piece loosely based on Tristan und Isolde, from creation as an act dependent on prior destruction, to creation as an act dependent on a love bond. As de Costa points out, the themes of Temblor de cielo seem to derive in part from Canto II of Altazor (“Introducción” 42).

16. See Hahn for a comparison of these and other verses to the characteristics of the traditionally British “nonsense” verse.

17. For example, Augusto de Campos’s page at www.2.uol.com.br/augustodecampos/clippoema.htm.


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Huidobro’s Rose: The Environmental Dialectics of Creacionismo

Christopher M. Travis

Si aceptáis las representaciones que un hombre hace de la Naturaleza, ello prueba que no amáis ni la Naturaleza ni el Arte.
—Vicente Huidobro, “Creacionismo” 739

(If you accept human representations of Nature, that proves you love neither Nature nor Art.)

Ecopoetics reawakens the pre-scientific magic of naming
—Jonathan Bate, The Song of the Earth 175

The twenty-first century has already witnessed the rapid yet conscientious growth of an evolved non-anthropocentric approach to literary theory that is sensitive to the role of the non-human world in the dialectics of contemporary literature. Studying the treatment of nature in poetry, as subject as well as object, environmental criticism (or ecocriticism) is quick to alert interested readers that it has moved far beyond a descriptive appreciation of nature as static, a limited metaphor for beauty, peace, or balance.

Certainly the universal scope of Vicente Huidobro’s creacionista aesthetics includes a powerful poetic dialogue with the forces of nature, lending itself to a rigorous re-reading according to the principles of environmental criticism. His “Arte poética” of 1916, along with other poetry and manifestos marked a well studied departure from Latin American modernismo and the advent of the vanguardia, challenging the objectification of nature as aesthetic fetish and proposing a more active dialogue with the non-human world. “Por qué cantáis la rosa, ¡oh Poetas! / Hacedla florecer en el poema” (Huidobro 1981: 219) (Oh Poets, why sing of roses! / Let them flower in your poems). In Altazor and other works from this self-proclaimed creacionista, the poetic process of search and aspiration, accompanied by the consciousness of failure, degeneration and regeneration presents a form of dialectical inquiry that actively acknowledges the forces
of nature. However, Huidobro also maintains famously that “El Poeta es un pequeño Dios” (219) (The poet is a little God).

This apparent apotheosis of the poet has preconditioned critical readings of the Chilean’s work to be purely anthropocentric and limited the reception of creacionismo. The claim might strike some as egotistical, blasphemous or delusional, with the subsequent failure in Altazor thus marking the end of an enterprise destined to fail. However, the modifier “un pequeño” (a little) reminds us that Huidobro’s desire to create is primarily concerned with the realm of poetry only, and the creative potential of innovative poetic expression. In his address to the Ateneo de Madrid in 1921 (“La Poesía”) he wishes to see poetry reach “más allá del último horizonte . . . allá del espíritu y la materia” (717) (Beyond the last horizon [. . .] beyond spirit and matter).

But we must note that the poet can only contemplate this new poetic space from the branches of a planted tree: “Allí ha plantado el árbol de sus ojos y desde allí contempla el mundo, desde allí os habla y os descubre los secretos del mundo” (717) (There he has planted the tree of his eyes and from there he contemplates the world, from there he speaks to you and discovers for you the secrets of the world).

His poetry challenges the traditional hierarchy that places one supreme God as creator of man; that man is privileged to have been created in God’s image and thus reigns over nature, a static object of modernista contemplation. Huidobro refuses to serve as an apostle of nature (“Non Serviam”) but a close reading of his work reveals the essential role played by the non-human world in his dialectics of search for, loss of, and renewed search for meaning. We will base our analysis on a number of poems that mark the evolution of his work from an initial departure from modernismo to the most consciously and theoretically developed incarnations of his creacionismo. Written throughout the middle of Huidobro’s poetic production, his famous Altazor (1919–1931) will anchor our ecocritical reflections on the manner in which the non-human world serves as an essential, integrated component of his poetic project. This project, the epitome of the vanguardia, entails a ceaseless active engagement with the natural world in a dialectical process to challenge meaning, deconstructing the very forms of poetic expression and mocking mimetic representation in order to approximate the “creation,” in direct conjunction with his natural environment, of a new poetic world.

Environmental criticism gained early momentum through a dedicated journal, association and website that made numerous critical articles readily available, and was anchored by the Ecocriticism Reader (1996), edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Glotfelty offered broad definitions and essential questions to inspire ecocritical readings, writing that “simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment [. . .] ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to
literary studies” (xviii). Major tenets were that literary studies be reconnected to place, be earth-centered (ecocentric) and challenge traditional delineations of text according to genre, gender, or discipline. The interdisciplinary approach has thus embraced other approaches such as marxism, feminism, neo-indigenism, and even aspects of poststructuralism by subverting traditional social and textual hierarchies, calling into question the notion of “center,” and rejecting an anthropocentric basis for human creative production. Even in the most incipient stages, critics urged that studies of meaning, the transmission of meaning, representation, language and literature be linked to the natural world.

Ecocriticism is also concerned with contemporary politics, the environmental crisis, racial, ethnic, and environmental justice, and how a more conscious approach to culture might alter the actions and vision of professors, students, artists, and critics. It is therefore perfectly suited to address the work of well known Latin American ecological writers such as Homero Aridjis, José Emilio Pacheco, Eduardo Galeano, Nicanor Parra, Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Elicura Chihuailaf, and many others. In their books and various articles, the leading scholars in these endeavors have been Steven White and Niall Binns, who—besides White’s expert work in Nicaraguan poetry—have each taken a particular interest in Chile, studying not only the presence of the non-human world, but the environmentalist ethics of their poetic subjects. Their studies are keenly aware of international ecocritical currents while comprehending the autonomy and rich heritage of Latin American literature and criticism, that a critical apparatus not be “exported,” let’s say, and imposed upon a region, but rather applied as an additional inroad to appreciation and study.4 Because of this very sensitivity to the ethical and political dimension of what can be deemed an “ecological” text, however, these scholars and others may have overlooked Huidobro’s ecological side, viewing his work as overly anthropocentric and futurist, a technophile’s effort to dominate the world.5 Niall Binns does recognize the manner in which Huidobro’s early poetry is able to “recrear la naturaleza, recrearse con ella en el hallazgo de combinaciones nuevas, ingeniosas y a veces geniales” (46) (recreate nature, discover, in recreation with nature, new, ingenious, and at time marvelous combinations). However, he is concerned about Huidobro’s “mutilación” (mutilation) of nature, such as birds, concluding that creacionismo is nothing more than the vain efforts of a “criatura del desarraigo” (47) (creature of detachment or “uprootedness”). What Binns deems the mistreatment of the nightingale in Altazor, along with Huidobro’s many apparently self-deifying manifestos, is offered as support for such a classification. However, this is the same nightingale tracked by Oscar Hahn as a necessary partner in the conscious dismantling of the natural world in order to provide it with new expressive life. The same occurs with murky stagnant pond water, crumbling mountains, and trees into
which the poet himself dissolves, various birds, animals, the sea to which the poet composes his famous *monumento*, and of course, the high flying, and rapidly tumbling hybrid altazor, “high” (flying)”goshawk,” whose very failure to transcend enables, dialectically, a new quest for meaning.

Does Huidobro’s poetry represent an ego-centric, luciferian anti-ecology, or does he position himself as a “pequeño” Dios specifically to work in conjunction with nature to give it new life, thus trying to share a piece of its creative power and subvert Judeo-Christian hierarchical divinity? Acknowledging various scholars’ effective work on the Chilean’s Emersonian challenge to divinity, we will undertake the study of representative texts and manifestos to suggest that such “integration with nature” is exactly what is at play and at stake in these poems.

As the ecocritical movement progresses, it has understandably come to historicize its own significant growth, and scholars such as Lawrence Buell, actively involved since the early stages, reflect on their own work as a snapshot of the evolution of the field. Buell looks to legitimize the ecocritical potential of any text according to the approach taken by the critic, and certainly any text where the non-human environment is actively involved in the significance of the contribution made by the literary work, the process, that is, or the struggle of that literature. He reflects:

Once I thought it helpful to try to specify a subspecies of “environmental text,” the first stipulation of which was that the nonhuman environment must be envisioned not merely as a framing device but as an active presence [...]. Now it seems to me more productive inclusively as the property of any text. (25)

He goes on to quote an essay by Robert Kern on the broad applicability of ecocriticism: “Ecocriticism becomes most interesting and useful when it aims to recover the environmental character or orientation of works whose conscious or foregrounded interests lie elsewhere” (Buell 26). Marxist ecocritic Lance Newman supports this “recovery” by maintaining that no cultural production is possible independent of the fundamental processes of life. The subject/object dynamic of Western Marxism, that meaning is affected by and in turn affects the social and material environment cannot exclude the natural world.6

Finally, Sueellen Campbell’s groundbreaking study “The Land and Language of Desire: Where Deep Ecology and Post-Structuralism Meet” makes the clear ecocritical connection to what poststructuralist theory values in metapoetics: poetry that considers the terms of its own existence. “We are part of nature, and when we study nature there is no way around the fact that nature is studying itself. We always affect any system we touch” (129). Outlining where ecology fits into the poststructuralist endeavor to find meaning by tearing down textual representation, she writes that “Theory is right, I think, that what we are depends on all kinds of influences outside
ourselves, that we are part of vast networks, texts written by larger and stronger forces. But surely one of the most important of these forces is the rest of the natural world” (134).

Our discussion of Huidobro’s reception must start with his most famous manifesto, Non Serviam (1914) and the early poem “arte poética” from El espejo de agua (1916). The language of the former appears to assert dominance over nature. The lines “No he de ser tu esclavo, madre Natura; seré tu amo. Te servirás de mí; está bien” (I will not be your slave, mother Nature; I will be your master. You will make use of me; that is very well) and then “Yo tendré mis árboles que no serán como los tuyos, tendré mis montañas, tendré mis ríos y mis mares, tendré mi cielo y mis estrellas” (I will have my trees and they will not be like yours, I will have my mountains, I will have my rivers and my seas, I will have my sky and my stars) are those cited by Binns to demonstrate Huidobro’s disconnection from nature (Huidobro 715). But there is a section Binns neglects to cite between the two lines that makes the relationship truly reciprocal: “No quiero y no puedo evitarlo; pero yo también me serviré de ti” (I do not wish to, nor can I avoid it; but I will also make use of you). The same document not only personifies nature but maintains her past and present creative power: “Hemos cantado a la Naturaleza (cosa que a ella bien poco le importa). Nunca hemos creado realidades propias, como ella lo hace o lo hizo en tiempos pasados, cuando era joven y llena de impulsos creadores” (We have sung to Nature (something that matters little to her). Never have we created our own realities, as she does and did in times past, when she was young and filled with creative impulses). The implication, then is that nature somehow deserves to be reinvented, given new life and meaning. Cedomil Goic’s seminal study of Huidobro continues to be, after 53 years, one of the most detailed and the most cited. Regarding Non Serviam he preempts the debate on his countryman’s apparent “break” with nature:

Lo que interesa señalar en este momento de la génesis de la teoría creacionista de Huidobro, en primer término, es la violencia con que se pone de manifiesto la ruptura con la naturaleza, en un momento donde Huidobro no podía todavía vislumbrar sus posibilidades. Por otra parte, ninguno de los teóricos posteriores europeos que se plantearon idéntico problema lo hicieron en términos de Poesía y Naturaleza, sino en términos de poesía y realismo. (66)

(What is of interest to indicate at this moment of the genesis of Huidobro’s creacionista theory, in the first place, is the violence with which the break with nature becomes manifest, at a moment when not even Huidobro could anticipate its possibilities. On the other hand, none of the later European theorists that would posit the very same question did so in terms of Poetry and Nature, but rather in terms of poetry and realism.)
Thus the poet’s aggression, put in its developmental context by Goic, predates a later engagement with nature and already suggests a new theoretical dialogue.

Only a few years later, Huidobro expounds upon the earlier rebellions in his “Creación Pura” from *Saison Choisies* (1921). Clearly he sees that

El hombre sacude su esclavitud, se rebela contra la naturaleza como otrora Lucifer contra Dios: pero tal rebelión es sólo aparente: *pues nunca el hombre ha estado más cerca de la naturaleza que ahora, en que no trata ya de imitarla en sus apariciones, sino de proceder como ella, imitándola en el fondo de sus leyes constructivas*, en la realización de un todo, en su mecanismo de producción de formas nuevas. En seguida veremos cómo el hombre, producto de la naturaleza, sigue en sus producciones independientes el mismo orden y las mismas leyes que la naturaleza [. . .] ya que el hombre pertenece a la naturaleza y no puede evadirse de ella, él debe tomar de ella la esencia de sus creaciones. (Huidobro’s italics) (718)

(Man shakes off his slavery, rebelling against nature like another Lucifer against God: But this rebellion is only apparent: *for never as man been closer to nature that he is now, trying not to imitate it in appearance, but to proceed like nature, imitating it in the depths of his constructive principles*, in realization of all that is, in the manner of the production of new forms. Presently we will see how man, a product of nature, follows his independent production the very same order and laws as nature [. . .] since man pertains to nature and cannot escape that, he must take from her the very essence of her creations.)

This creed, effectively repeated word-for-word by today’s environmental critics, would go on to define the subsequent twenty years of Huidobro’s production.

Stan Tag, in a position paper on the “Four Ways of Looking at Ecocriticism,” quotes Walt Whitman: “There can be no theory of any account unless it corroborate the theory of the earth / No politics, song, religion, behavior, or what not, is of account, unless it / Compare with the amplitude of the earth / Unless it face the exactness, vitality, impartiality, rectitude of the earth” (Tag). Tag comments that “Language is not inherently separate from the natural world, as some theories may suggest, but is evolving out of the same evolutionary processes as the earth itself” (Tag).8 Ironically, Tag’s comments of 1994 reflect the vestiges of a romantic idealism that Huidobro rejected when he moved beyond the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century *modernismo*. He even rejects Whitman specifically in the preface to *Altazor*.9 Depending on what exactly Tag means by “face,” Huidobro certainly did not express the same faith in poetry to measure, reflect, nor even comprehend the natural world as did someone like Walt Whitman, but that did not prevent him from linking his poetic *creacionismo* to the “evolutionary processes of the earth.”
Such processes, taking us back to Sueellen Campbell and Lance Newman and the generative dialectics of Marxist and poststructuralist ecocriticism, can only be honestly thematized as the failure of language, the death, and consequent fertilization of a renewed signifying cycle—best modeled by the earth’s own ecosystem. In “Creacionismo” Huidobro paraphrases his own comments from the famous talk given at the Ateneo de Madrid in 1921: “El Arte es una cosa y la Naturaleza otra. Yo amo mucho el Arte y mucho la Naturaleza. Y si aceptáis las representaciones que un hombre hace de la Naturaleza, ello prueba que no amáis ni la Naturaleza ni el Arte” (739) (Art is one thing and nature another. I greatly love Art and greatly love Nature. If you accept human representations of Nature, that proves you love neither Nature nor Art). At this juncture it would be necessary to carefully document Huidobro’s move beyond modernismo as a static imitation and fetishization of nature to a more dynamic understanding of nature’s vitality, if it were not for the many thorough studies that already exist. In his impassioned assessment of his friend’s impact on young Chilean writers as early as 1918, Rafael Cansino-Assens focuses on the difference between static imitation of nature—“reproducir fielmente sus obras naturales” (faithfully reproduce her natural works)—and creative refraction: “el poeta hace de la naturaleza un símbolo, se la apropia, la desfigura, le infunde de dolor o de júbilo de su semblante, la suplanta, nos promete la naturaleza, pero nos da su alma” (122, 123) (The poet turns nature into a symbol, taking hold of it, desfiguring it, and imbuing it with all the pain and jubilation of its countenance, supplants it, promising us nature, he gives us his soul). Braulio Arenas adds that “El poema, pensaba Huidobro, debe ser una realidad en sí, no la copia de una realidad exterior. Debe oponer su realidad interna a la realidad circundante” (179) (The poem, Huidobro thought, should be a reality in itself, not the copy of an exterior reality. It should posit its interior reality against the surrounding world).

According to most critics, the early text Adán does not yet fully embody the major tenets of creacionismo. It does, however, clearly display the poet’s clear recurrence to nature as a powerful creative force, associating the signifying fertility of the natural world with that of the poet on equal and collaborative terms. In the preface to the project, Huidobro posits an Emersonian sense of self-reliant transcendentalism that displaces the role of one almighty Creator, by paraphrasing the North American in translation: “El poema no lo hacen los ritmos, sino el pensamiento creador del ritmo: un pensamiento tan apasionado, tan vivo, que, como el espíritu de una planta o un animal, tiene una arquitectura propia, adorna la Naturaleza con una cosa nueva” (189) (The poem is not created by the rhythms, but by the creative thought of the rhythm: a thought so passionate, so alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, has its own architecture, adorning Nature with something new).
The invocation of Emerson was originally studied by Goic in reference to Adán and later works such as the famous declaration that the poet is a “pequeño Dios.” More recently the topic has been revisited by Mireya Camurati in a section of her book titled “Relación Hombre-Naturaleza” (The Man-Nature Relationship). Comparing the avant-garde to Victor Hugo’s romantic concept of art as a faithful copy of the natural world from a century earlier, Camurati addresses Huidobro’s rejection: “Rechaza el consejo [Hugo] de copiar la naturaleza y declara que esta doctrina es enemiga del arte” (131) (He rejects the advice to copy nature and declares such a doctrine to be the enemy of art). Her study recurs to his many manifestos and public statements, principally Non Serviam. Summarizing, Camurati directly connects the two free-thinkers:

puedemos inferir las ideas básicas de Huidobro acerca del tema de la relación Hombre-Naturaleza. Establece un enfrentamiento del Hombre rebelde contra la Naturaleza. La rebeldía consiste en negarse a imitar los elementos u objetos de la Naturaleza. Es decir, que está en contra de la regla tradicional de la mimesis. (134)

(Huidobro’s basic ideas regarding the Man-Nature relationship can be inferred. He establishes a confrontation between Man as rebel against Nature. The rebellion amounts to refusing to imitate the elements or objects of Nature. That is, he is against the traditional rule of mimesis.)

La doctrina transcendentalista propone una aproximación atenta a una Naturaleza que no es extraña al hombre y de la cual éste puede aprender las leyes de la creación orgánica y que le permitirán a su vez ser creador. No hay enfrentamiento sino comunión. (135)

(The transcendentalist doctrine proposes a careful approximation of a Nature that is not foreign to man and from which man can learn the laws of organic creation, permitting him to become, in turn, a creator. There is no confrontation but rather communion.)

However, she clearly distinguishes that Emerson’s proposal is “armonioso” (135) (harmonious) while Huidobro’s is more contentious. Similar concerns have been expressed regarding the Chilean’s aggressive assertion “yo seré tu amo” (175) (I will be your master) as mentioned earlier. However, the context of Non Serviam includes literary history—“Hasta ahora no hemos hecho otra cosa que imitar al mundo en sus aspectos, no hemos creado nada” (until now we have done nothing more than imitate the world in its aspects, we have not created anything), and idealism: “hemos aceptado, sin mayor reflexión, el hecho de que no puede haber otras realidades que las que nos rodean, y no hemos pensado que nosotros también podemos crear realidades en un mundo nuestro” (715) (we have accepted, with no further reflection,
the fact that there can be no other realities than those that surround us, and we have not thought that we can create realities in our own world). It concludes with a collaborative pledge: “Una nueva era comienza. Al abrir sus puertas de jaspe, hincó una rodilla en tierra y te saludo muy respetuosamente” (715) (A new era begins. Opening its jasper doors I go down on one knee upon this earth and salute you respectfully). Camurati thus connects “hombre-naturaleza” but does not explore Huidobro’s project of collaborative integration with nature over the subsequent twenty-five years.

Just as the biblical Adam initiates human contact with the natural world, Huidobro’s alternative version is enervated poetically by each and every aspect of the non-human. In “El himno del sol” the poet/Adán proclaims the attraction: “Si de todas las cosas de la tierra / Pudierais hallar la quintaesencia / Me hallaríais a mí en todas ellas” (191) (If among all things of this earth you could discover the quintessence, you would find me within each of them). In “Adán” he pursues direct incorporation of nature: “Entrad en mí, Naturaleza, / Entrad en mí ¡oh cosas de la tierra! / Dejad que yo os adquiera, / Dadme la suprema alegría / De haceros substancia mía / Todo esto que nace en el suelo / Quiro sentirlo adentro” (196) (Enter into me, Nature, / Enter into me, oh things of this earth! / Let me acquire you / Give me supreme happiness / of making you my own substance / All this born in the ground / I wish to feel it inside).

Once the poet has completely engaged with the natural world, he intends to harness its generative powers to, in turn, cultivate new life and expression for that very world. The critical concern over the desire to “dominate” must be replaced, ecocritically, with a recognition that for every ounce of creative potential the poet enjoys he pays tribute to the natural environment, looking to provide it with new life in the most respectful manner. It is in 1916 (Espejo de agua) when Huidobro famously cries “Por qué cantáis la rosa, ¡oh Poetas! / Hacedla florecer en el poema / [. . .] El Poeta es un pequeño Dios” (219) (Oh Poets, why sing of roses! / Let them flower in your poems . . . The poet is a little God). He is not looking to dominate nature, but allow it to flourish. The apparent apotheosis of the poet is not the pronounced anthropocentrism it may appear to be. He specifically writes “un pequeño” and not just “Dios” because, again according to Emersonian transcendentalism, the poet claims his place as a creator, not the Creator.

Goic describes this significant distinction:

Acepta una diferencia de grado, en relación al Creador Absoluto, que crea de la nada, por eso nos habla de un “pequeño Dios.” No olvidemos que Tomás de Aquinas rechazaba el nombre de creador para el poeta porque la forma preexiste en la materia en potencia, en la creación humana. Pero en este “pequeño Dios,” o como diría Gerardo Diego, “niño Dios,” está el acento más significativo de toda la teoría huidobriana. (74)
(He accepts a degree of difference in relation to the Absolute Creator, he who creates from nothingness, and for that reason speaks to us of a “little God.” Let’s not forget that the Thomas of Aquinas rejected the term of creator for the poet because the form preexists in very potential of the material, in human creation. But with this “little God,” or as Gerardo Diego would say “child God,” we find the most distinctive expression of Huidobro’s theory.)

It is with this in mind that we continue our study of the integral role of nature in Huidobro’s search for meaning in poetic expression. We must remember, however, that the search, in its most sincere moments, thematizes the breakdown of poetry, a metapoetic reflection on failed transcendence, the rapid descent of Altazor that inevitably follows the loftiest aspirations. The poet looks to provide a refraction rather than a reflection of nature, and the disintegration of the non-human world parallels the disintegration of the human ability to capture and render its image. The conscious and careful procedure of destruction (often described as “cubist” fragmentation) leads to death (of natural beings as well as language) and from death, the fertile soil for rebirth. Scholars have studied this concept from various perspectives, and usually in reference to Altazor. Goic and de Costa comment structurally on the necessary loss of faith in poetry by the third canto of the poem, so that a new process of creation can begin in the fourth (Goic 233, de Costa 1989: 34). Federico Schopf reduces his thesis to the following: “para el sujeto (anti)poético de Altazor, la destrucción de la lengua—no sólo su desconstrucción, que es razonada—conduce a la nueva poesía: el acto de destrucción permite el surgimiento de los significantes de la poesía intentada en el poema” (5) (For the (anti)poetic subject of Altazor, the destruction of language—not just its reasoned deconstruction—leads to new poetry: the act of destruction permits the emergence of the signifiers of the kind of poetry intended in the poem). Schopf does not focus on nature, but rather the signifier itself and the “demolición intencional del lenguaje” (10) (intentional demolition of language), but the victims of this destruction are often the words representing the swallow, the nightingale, ponds, mountains, trees, rivers, the sea, and other flora or fauna.

Oscar Hahn and Cecil Wood study the ponds, whose black stagnant water ripples and refracts the world. Their deterioration is part of the poetic process in poems such as “Espejo de agua” (The Mirror of Water) or the earlier “Los estanques nocturnos” (Nocturnal Ponds) from Las pagodas ocultas (1914). For Wood, the ponds have “evocative powers” but also hidden potential to be awakened by the poet (43). Hahn warns against a misinterpretation of the “espejo”: “El espejo representa exactamente lo contrario de la estética creacionista y de ello Huidobro está muy consciente [...] pero no hay contradicción [...] no se trata de un espejo de agua de esos que adornan los parques de la realidad sino de un espejo en movimiento” (100) (the mirror represents the exact contrary of the creacionista aesthetic
and Huidobro is very conscious of that [. . .] but there is no contradiction [. . .] it is not about the type of reflective pools that adorn the parks of reality, but rather a mirror in movement). The poem reads:

(My mirror, a current in the nights,
Becomes a brook and leaves my room.
My mirror, deeper than the orb
Where all the swans have drowned.
It is a green pool in the rampart
Your fixed nakedness sleeps in its midst.
Over its waves, beneath somnambulant skies,
My dreams draw away as ships.
Standing astern you will always see me singing.
A secret rose is swelling in my breast
And a drunken nightingale flutters on my finger.)

Hahn astutely comments on the dynamic nature of these waters, points out the inherent critique of the “cisne modernista” (modernist swan) that is now drowned in verdant pond, and then addresses the inebriated nightingale. An apparent disrespect for nature, it is, according to Hahn, more aptly understood as a classic bird of poetic inspiration in an altered mode. It does not represent the psychic automatism of surrealism, but rather “un estado de superconsciencia” (a state of superconsciousness) according to the various textual and intertextual proof Hahn offers (101). Alongside the drunken nightingale, deformed and deteriorated yet poised for new meaning, we find the rose. The absolute essence of creacionismo, this rose is personal, secret, and does not sprout or grow (“brotar,” “crecer”) nor get cultivated (“cultivarse”), but simply swells (“se hincha”). He does not sing to it nor romanticize it but conceives it poetically in a new form.

The rose appears again in “Marino” (Sailor), one of the most significant poems from Poemas árticos (1918) (Arctic Poems). While the poetic voice is that of an aging mariner, it is also that of the poet who imagines his poetic path already forged. Well traveled like the seafarer, the poet now wishes to stitch together the fragments of the horizon, split apart one year earlier with
the publication of the cubist book *Horizon carré* (1917) (Square Horizon).
Having published more than ten books of poetry, Huidobro reflects intertextually on past works but also anticipates his role as a poetic mariner:

“Yo inventé juegos de agua / en la cima de los árboles / […] Hice correr ríos / que nunca han existido / de un grito elevé una montaña / […] Corté todas las rosas / de las nubes del este / y enseñé a cantar un pájaro”

(Huidobro 1981: 308) (I invented waterfalls / In the tops of trees / […] I made rivers run / where none had been before / from a scream I raised mountains […] I cut all the roses / from the clouds of the East / and I taught a snowbird how to sing). 13 Again the harvested roses, like none that have ever existed, are charged with generative potential. They are controlled by the poet, and yet are also his source of imagined power. 14

We must limit our description to “imagined” power because we are aware of the complex narrative of metaphysical and poetic aspiration ending in freefall defeat found in Huidobro’s master work, *Altazor* (1919–1931), where the rose never once plays a traditional literary role. As de Costa illustrates on numerous occasions, the work can be studied episodically as the story of various stages of deterioration of language and a failed effort to reconstruct: “entre las etapas de *Altazor* hay varios y variados comienzos con un final común: el fracaso” (*Altazor* 25) (Throughout the stages of *Altazor* there are many and varied beginnings with one common ending: the failure). The first *Canto* maintains a “fe redentor en la poesía” (redemptive faith in poetry) but “a partir del Canto III los versos de *Altazor* asumen una dirección clara de movimiento hacia una progresiva desarticulación que culmina en el grito prístino que cierra el Canto VII y el libro” (32) (from the Canto III on, the verses of *Altazor* assume a clear direction of movement towards a progressive dearticulation that culminates in the pristine shout that closes Canto VII and the book). The method described by de Costa is that of using and abusing every linguistic possibility until each morpheme becomes exhausted of previous meaning and primed for new significance. While de Costa refers to any possible signifier, the conscious breakdown of the natural world is of particular interest.

The rose, for example, first appears deceptively as a symbol of friendship between the poet and the divine, a source of divine poetic inspiration. The work adheres to the classic trope of the poet as privileged agent of a supernatural being (Alonso de Ercilla’s *La Araucana*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, etc.) who has particular faith in him as a superior poet. In the preface to the poem the poet comes upon an apparition of the virgin, seated on a rose, who speaks to him, declaring herself “la capitana de las otras once mil” (the captain of the other eleven thousand) and inviting a declaration of mutual devotion: “Ámame, hijo mío, pues adoro tu poesía y te enseñaré proezas aéreas” (Huidobro 2003: 382) (Love me, my son, since I love your poetry and will teach you aerial prowess). 15 This apparently blasphemous
union (subsequently lying down with the virgin) parodies Christian divinity and displaces “Dios” to make room for new creation. The preface is visionary and optimistic like Canto I and the rose begins as a symbol of poetry along with the parachute that Altazor takes with him on his journey. He depends on the parachute to ascend and to fall, as with poetry, comparing the two metaphorically among the last lines of the preface: “Ah mi paracaidas, la única rosa perfumada de la atmósfera, la rosa de la muerte, despeñada entre los astros de la muerte” (384) (Oh, my parachute, the only perfumed rose of the stratosphere, the rose of death, cascading through the stars of death).

In Canto I the voyage continues as the poet dialogues with Altazor, his own alter-ego (“Soy yo Altazor el doble de mí mismo” (387) (Altazor am I the double of my self)) and an obvious neologism, alto + azor, a goshawk who has already been tainted linguistically as signifier and will now experience an aspiration destined to fail. In his most empowered moment, the poet/Altazor displaces God (“Dios diluido en la nada y el todo [. . .] Dios pútrido” (God diluted in the nothing and the all [. . .] Putrid God)) and calls others to arms: “Cambiemos nuestra suerte” (387, 388) (We must change our luck). Canto I is a microcosm of the poem as a whole, and indeed Huidobro’s entire body of work. It forecasts Altazor’s entire trajectory as he disintegrates, confronts himself and his creator (“Vicente Huidobro”) directly and then gathers strength to rise again. The fall is collective and universal as we all become fodder for the growth of chaos, and Altazor correctly puts the blame on Huidobro:

Yo tú él nosotros vosotros ellos
Ayer hoy mañana
Pasto en las fauces del insaciable olvido
Pasto para la rumia eterna del caos incansable
Justicia ¿qué has hecho de mí Vicente Huidobro?
Se me cae el dolor de la lengua y las alas marchitas
Se me caen los dedos muertos uno a uno
¿Qué has hecho de mi voz cargada de pájaros en el atardecer
La voz que me dolía como sangre? (389)

(I you he we they
Yesterday today tomorrow
A pasture for the gullets of insatiable oblivion
A pasture for the perpetual rumination of tireless chaos
Justice—what have you done to me Vicente Huidobro?
Pain falls from my tongue and my clipped wings
One by one my dead fingers fall off
What have you done to my voice heavy with birds as evening falls
The voice that once hurt like bleeding?)
Altazor and Huidobro then gather strength together by playing with words, dissecting them and reconnecting them to begin to forge new meaning. According to David Bary, this is the beginning of the poet’s “Parodia Divina” (Divine Parody) and where, for de Costa, the poet begins to “redicularizar la inmensidad” (389) (ridicule immensity).

No acepto vuestras sillas de seguridades cómodas  
Soy el ángel salvaje que cayó una mañana  
En vuestras plantaciones de preceptor  
Poeta  
Antipoeta  
Culto  
Anticulto  
Animal metafísico cargado de congojas  
Animal espontáneo directo sangrando sus problemas  
Solitario como una paradoja  
Paradoja fatal  
Flor de contradicciones bailando un fox-trot  
Sobre el sepulcro de Dios. (393)

(I do not accept your armchairs of comfortable security  
I’m the savage angel who fell one morning  
Onto your plantations of precepts  
Poet  
Antipoet  
Cultured  
Anticultured  
A metaphysical animal burdened with dismay  
An open spontaneous animal bleeding his predicaments  
Lonely as a paradox  
Fatal paradox  
A flower of contradictions dancing a foxtrot  
On the crypt of God.)

Defined more by what he is not than by what he is (not human, not a real animal, an antipoet, a paradox, with and without voice, a flower of contradictions), Altazor undertakes his linguistic quest, and the reader is saturated with signifiers to the point where all meaning is lost. Altazor then appears to regain strength, fully displacing God and becoming the minister of nonsense, in balanced dialogue with nature.

Soy desmesurado cósmico  
Las piedras las plantas las montañas  
Me saldan Las abejas las ratas  
Los leones y las águilas  
Los astros los crepúsculos las albas
Los ríos y las selvas me preguntan
¿Qué tal cómo está usted?
Y mientras los astros y las olas tengan algo que decir
Será por mi boca que hablarán a los hombres
Que Dios sea Dios
[..] Señor Dios si tú existes es a mí a quien lo debes. (394)

(I am cosmically outrageous
Stones plants mountains
Greet me Bees rats
Lions and Eagles
Stars sunsets dawns
Rivers and forests ask me
What’s new how are you?
And as long as the stars and the waves have something to say
It will be through my voice that they speak to man
Let God be God
[..] Lord God if you exist you owe it all to me.)

If the rose continues to represent poetry, it is a poetry that makes us sick,
words borrowed from nature that no longer can be digested, yet we are
commanded to take them, as holy communion, from our minister of
creacionismo:

Las palabras con fiebre y vértigo interno
Las palabras del poeta dan un mareo celeste
Dan una enfermedad de nubes
Contagioso infinito de planetas errantes
Epidemia de rosas en la eternidad
Abrid la boca para recibir la hostia de la palabra herida
La hostia angustiada y ardiente que me nace no se sabe dónde. (397)

(Words with fever and internal whooziness
The poet’s words cause air-sickness
They bring on cloud-sickness
A contagious infinite of errant planets
An epidemic of roses in eternity
Open your mouth and receive the host of the wounded word
The afflicted burning host that is born within me I don’t know where.)

The poet can now convene with nature—“el mundo se me entra por los ojos”
(The world enters through my eyes)—and repeats three times emphatically
“Silencio la tierra va a dar a luz un árbol” (399) (Silence the earth will give
birth to a tree). The relationship with birds, rivers, trees, flowers and the sea
continues to develop as the poet depends on nature’s collaboration to create
anew (399–401).
We must remember that the poetic endeavor here is foremost an honest metapoetics on the very limits of poetry. Language and natural order alike are subverted methodically from the first lines of Canto III, as “la flor se comerá a la abeja,” “el arco-iris se hará pájaro,” “Las miradas serán ríos,” “Conducirá el rebaño a su pastor,” (The flower will suck the bee, The rainbow will become a bird, Glances will be rivers, The flock will guide its shepherd) and poetry is not immune to this breakdown:

Matemos al poeta que nos tiene saturados
Poesía aún y poesía poesía
Poética poesía poesía
Poesía poética de poético poeta
Poesía
Demiadiada poesía. (406)

(Let us kill the poet who gluts us
Poetry still and poetry poetry
Poetical poetry poetry
Poetical poetry by poetical poets
Poetry
Too much poetry.)

What follows is a series of calculated misapplications of the modifier to the modified culminating in the burial of poetry itself and the conclusion: “todas las lenguas están muertas” (408) (All the languages are dead). While it marks the most dramatic moments of breakdown, this section has drawn critical attention as the most productive.¹⁶

It is not long after in Canto IV when the rose is included along with so many other components of the natural world in a section that drew the attention of Cedomil Goic (1955: 288). Urged on numerous times—“no hay tiempo que perder” (There’s no time to lose)—the poet scampers to rebuild a world as fast as he can tear one down: “No hay tiempo que perder” / 
Rose upturned and rose returned and rose and rose / Though the warden don’t want it / Muddy rivers make for clean fishing). Playing with the interior rhyme scheme, repetition, and even suggesting an unconventional splitting of the word “milag-rosa” by association (there is no effort to repeat the pun in the translation), the poet places the rose on the etymological and ontological chopping block along with everything else. Fifty-six lines later the poet has reached his well studied attack on the swallow (golondrina, golonfina, golontrina, golonchina, golonrisa, etc.) and the nightingale (ruiseñor, rodoñol, roreñol, romiñol, etc.). (Again, a distinct approach must be taken in the translation: swooping swallow, whooping wallow, weeping wellow, and then nighdongale, nighrengale, nighmingale, nighfangale, etc.).
But it is not an attack on the birds themselves as much as the arbitrary words used to represent them. Employing the French word for nightingale (rosignol), Huidobro has inserted the six notes of the musical scale (do, re, mi, fa, so, la) within each of the neologisms. Niall Binns has listed the many deformations of the nightingale as proof that Huidobro is detached from and disinterested in his natural environment, and seems to resent that the chosen bird is not even one that is traditionally found in the Americas. Calling Huidobro’s interest in the bird is further proof of his “alienación galófila” (gallophiliac alienation), Binns generally accuses the Chilean of “ecocidio” (ecocide). We would answer that there is no better representative of nature than this symbol of European aestheticism to suffer the creacionista reprogramming here applied. Many of these early poems were first written in French simply because the poet was in France working with Pierre Reverdy and the magazine Nord-Sud and it is well documented that Altazor builds on Huidobro’s earlier work.17 Moreover, the grand plan fails, and Altazor falls to his grave alongside Vicente Huidobro, the birds, and everything else. The respect and acknowledgement of the natural world is that the poet becomes profoundly integrated with every aspect of the environment, failing to become a god, but participating as partner and accomplice with nature.

The non-human is inseparable from the human (integrated into the very names we call ourselves) and we all must fall in order to be reconstructed with renewed meaning. As seen in one of the epigraphs that opens this article, marking or naming the natural world—making a new personal register of nature—is seen as a fundamental essence of a human’s creative life by critics concerned with the “ecopoetics” of writing.18 Along with the “rosa al revés” and the birds that have been plucked of their feathers and otherwise altered, humans and non-humans, Altazor and Vicente Huidobro himself, are laid to rest in Canto IV:

Aquí yace Marcelo mar y cielo en el mismo violonchelo
Aquí yace Susana cansada de pelear contra el olvido
Aquí yace Teresa ésa es la tierra que araron sus ojos hoy ocupada por su cuerpo
Aquí yace Angélica anclada en el puerto de sus brazos
Aquí yace Rosario río de rosas hasta el infinito
Aquí yace Raimundo raíces del mundo son sus venas
Aquí yace Clarisa clara risa enclaustrada en la luz
Aquí yace Alejandro antro alejado ala adentro
Aquí yace Gabriela rotos los diques sube en las savias hasta el sueño esperando la resurrección
Aquí yace Altazor azor fulminado por la altura
Aquí yace Vicente antipoeta y mago. (415)

(Here lies Marcella heaven and hello in the same violoncello)
Here lies Susannah drained from straining against the void
Here lies Teresa placed in the terrain her eyes once plowed
Here lies Angelica anchored in the inlet of her arms
Here lies Rosemary rose carried to the infinite
Here lies Raymond rays of mud his veins
Here lies Clarissa clear is her smile encloistered in the light
Here lies Alexander alas under all is yonder
Here lies Gabriela breakwaters broken she rises in sap to the dream that
awaits resurrection
Here lies Altazor hawk exploded by the altitude
Here lies Vicente antipoet and magician.)

Just as the invented signifier Altazor is a combination of multiple concepts,
suggesting a destiny (to fly high as a hawk) that goes unfulfilled, so are
names like “Rosario,” river of roses.

Having highlighted one more manner in which we are inevitably linked
to the natural world, Huidobro commits Canto V to realizing this physical
and linguistic reintegration. The first lines of the first two stanzas announce
the final poetic gestures presented in Canto VI and VII to reach pure
creation: “Aquí comienza el campo inexplorado […] Hay un espacio despoblado / Que es precioso poblar” (417) (Here begins the unexplored
territory […] There is an unpopulated space / That must be populated). He
then describes an elusive “rosa del mar” a mysterious rose of the sea that
only the poet can find (418). It lures us in, the sea sinks the boats of our
journey, all ties are broken, and finally the rose begins to bloom in the
opposite (re-creative) direction: “La rosa rompe sus lazos y florece al
reverso de la muerte” (419) (The rose breaks its chains and flowers on the
other side of death). Words are literally ground up: “Molino del conocimiento / Molino del descendimiento / Molino del desollamiento / Molino del elevamiento” (424) (Mill of the education / Mill of the
dilapidation / Mill of the flagellation / Mill of the elevation) and the poet
becomes one with nature and one with the rose in its new and evolving
forms. He is firefly, he is air, birds. And, he is rose, speaking the new
language of the rose, without losing all else that he has become: “Ahora soy
rosal y hablo con lenguaje de rosal / Y digo / Sal rosa rosalafía / Sal rosa al día / Salía al sol rosa sario / Fueguisa mía sonrodería rososoro oro” (429)
(Now I’m a rosebush speaking rose language / and I say / Go rose
rosarosaray / Grow rose this day / Go rosary rose that rows away / fireaway
my possible rositive rostrum strum).

As we know, the final two cantos culminate in the notion of a new
language and new creation, products of this long epic poetic journey: “Lalalí / lo ia / i i o / Ai a i ai a i i io ia” (437) (Lalalee / Eeoh eeah / ee ee ee oh /
Ahee ah ee ahee ah ee ee ee oh eeah). But we must recognize, as
Huidobro did, that there is no final declaration of victory. This poem is a
new creation, embodying creacionismo, and its ultimate message is that Altazor’s flight, as with all poetic aspirations, is destined to fail. While the process of such an impossible poetic undertaking has long been venerated, from Plato and Aristotle to Sor Juana’s Primero Sueño, critics debate the merits of Huidobro’s endeavor. But the meaning and reason for poetic creacionismo and indeed all poetry is to undertake the journey, and like the elements of nature, the life of the poem, as well as any suggested new signification, comes to an end, degenerates, and nourishes future growth.

Ten years later Huidobro would publish Ver y Palpar (1941) (To See and Feel), whose very title suggests a corporeal connection to his subject matter, which turns out to plainly be the natural world. Últimos poemas (1948) (Last Poems) was published the year of his death. Critics will continue to debate the role of Huidobro as the “first” significant poet of the vanguardia in Latin America and what was or was not achieved according to his many manifestos. What we take, however, from his early work and from Altazor is that he clearly saw no reason to compromise the breadth and depth of his poetic aspirations, and yet clearly conveys that the process of “creation” is one of constant death and rebirth of meaning, in intimate conversation and dialectic conjunction with the natural world. The later poems demonstrate that the more mature Huidobro, facing the onset of the inevitable, and with greater reflective consciousness of what his earlier works may or may not have accomplished, communicates his poetic understanding of the world in a more sincere and conciliatory manner. The “Poema para hacer crecer los árboles” (Poem to Make Trees Grow) literally presents the piece-by-piece construction of trees, more than their cultivation: “Cinco ramas siete ramas doce ramas / Doce hojas veinte hojas y cien hojas / Sube y sube y sube / […] Ama la rama ama” (501) (Five branches seven branches twelve branches / Twelve leaves twenty leaves and one hundred leaves / Rise and rise and rise / […] Love the branch love). However, the poem also presents a somber undertone that plays on the phonetic associations of “rama” with “rema” (branch, row) evoking an allegorical journey upstream in the subterranean river of death: “Rema la rama / Rema la vida por sus dolientes / […] y los remeros remando / […] Remando vida arriba” (501) (Row the branch / Row life past its mourners / […] and the rowers rowing / Rowing uplife). The tree partners with the poet to ward off death, rowing upstream with its branches and standing in the way of death: “Un árbol que se yergue y cierra el paso a la muerte” (501) (A tree that stands up and blocks the path to death). Also appearing in Ver y Palpar (1941), “Naturaleza Viva” (Lifescape) presents the theme of death as well. As the accordion signals the “fin del mundo” (end of the world) and a blue-mouthed wolf threatens to “devorar a la abuela naturaleza” (eat up grandma nature), voices come together as an enormous cedar tree is born, a tree that is greater than God’s tree of creation: “Allí donde las voces se juntan nace un
enorme cedro / . . . Más grande que el árbol de la creación / Más hermoso que una corriente de aire entre los astros” (479) (Out where the voices gather a giant cedar is born / . . . Greater than the tree of creation / More beautiful than a flow of air between two stars). In this poem the poetic voice addresses a “Señor Cielo” (Mr. Sky) and a “Señora Nube” (Mrs. Cloud) rather than God, and recalls his early creation of a new swallow: “Una golondrina me dice papá” (480) (A swallow says papa to me). Once again the theories of Emerson are upheld, that the poet and nature are on equal standing, mutually nutritive, and more significant in their divine creations than a single divine “God.”

The poems published on the eve of the poet’s death continue the trajectory we have studied in this article, expressing, in the most sincere manner of all Huidobro’s poetry, a complete integration into the natural world. In “Monumento al mar” (Monument to the Sea) he speaks directly to the sea in conciliatory and almost apologetic terms, beckoning: “Olvida mis maldiciones y cantemos juntos esta noche / Hazte hombre como a veces me hago mar / Hagamos las paces te digo / Tú eres el más poderoso / Que yo estreche tus manos en las mías” (Huidobro 1981: 591) (Forget my curses and let’s sing together tonight / I say make yourself man like I sometimes make myself sea / I say let’s make peace / You’re the greater force / Let me squeeze your hands in mine).22 While the very act of making peace with the sea suggests an earlier antagonism, conflict necessarily accompanies peace and there is no union without division. The tension of the struggle that has been waged is real, but that is only because Huidobro chose to engage in dialectic interplay with nature, defining and being defined by it throughout his poetic life.

The punctuation mark on this concept and his poetry as a whole thus becomes the well known “Poesía es un atentado celeste” (Poetry is Heavenly Crime), a type of poetic memoir of his relationship, as poet and living being, with the natural world. Reflecting on his life as part of a regenerative cycle, the poet literally dissolves and erodes into his environment, giving his life to the rocks and trees: “Ando en viaje dando un poco de mi vida / A ciertos árboles y a ciertas piedras” (582) (I am away travelling giving a little of my life / To some trees and some stones). His own physical state becomes undefined and transient: “Yo no estoy y estoy / Estoy ausente y estoy presente” (Huidobro 1981: 582) (I’m not here and I’m here / I’m absent and I’m present).23 As ever, this process cannot exist independent of the struggle with and for language, and the poem tells the same story we have told in our study: “Ellos querían mi lenguaje para expresarse / Y yo quería el de ellos para expresarlos” (582) (They wanted my language so they could express themselves / And I wanted theirs to express them). The relationship is and always has been mutual, that of codependent parts of an ecosystem: “Me voy adentrando en estas plantas / Voy dejando mis ropas / Se me van cayendo las
carnes / Y mi esqueleto se va revistiendo de cortezas / Me estoy haciendo árbol” (583) (I’m moving inward on these soles / I’m leaving my clothes behind / My flesh is falling away on all sides / And my skeleton’s putting on bark / I am becoming tree). This, of course, brings us back to the recent sensitivity of ecocritics to the cycles of creation. All processes, be they poetic, human or non-human, are part of a cycle of creation, breakdown, integration into the generative environment, and regeneration. Perhaps it is time that contemporary readers and poets again become inspired by the nutritive powers of Huidobro’s work.

Notes

1. Author’s translations throughout unless otherwise indicated.
2. All translations cited from this poem are by David M. Guss.
3. In his introduction to Vicente Huidobro y la motivación del lenguaje, George Yúdice provides an excellent overview of the most significant bibliography on Huidobro available in 1978. He discusses approaches taken by various critics including Goic, de Costa, Concha, Carraciolo-Trejo, Wood, Pizarro, and Bary, among others, classifying the studies according to six categories: interpersonal relations; analysis of the theory of creacionismo; the relationship between creacionismo and the vanguardia; sociological approaches and interpretations; life and work of Vicente Huidobro; and finally, those which look primarily at prose. The work of Yudice, Wood and, to some degree, Mireya Camurati is the only commentary that begins to address the role of nature and the non-human world.

David Bary, in studies such as “Vicente Huidobro: Agente Viajero de la Poesía (1957),” discusses Huidobro’s social and interpersonal struggles, calling his approach to the literary world an “egoísmo infantil” (infantile egotism). Unfortunately, Bary’s concern about Huidobro’s ambition limits the merit he seems willing to afford to the poetic project itself, independent of the poet’s personality.

4. Steven White confronts this, for example, from the very first pages of his 2003 ecocritical study of Pablo Antonio Cuadra El mundo más que humano en la poesía de Pablo Antonio Cuadra: Un estudio ecocritico. He insists “que el aparato crítico no se considere aún como otro modelo teórico importado de la academia norteamericana y europea” (9) (that the critical apparatus not be considered yet another theoretical model imported from the North American and European academy).

5. Steven White, for example, in his very significant and consideration of the river in Chilean poetry, “Los ríos en la poesía chilena: nuevas definiciones ecocéntricas de la poesía épica y lírica,” agrees with (and cites) Niall Binns’s conclusions that the message of dominance over nature seems ever present and overpowering in Huidobro. His own remark is that: “Lo que predomina en la poesía huidobriana es una tecnofilia, tal como se aprecia en la poesía futurista de Marinetti [. . .] o sea un nuevo intento de conquistar y controlar la naturaleza” (129) (What is predominant in Huidobro’s poetry is a technophilia, like what can be seen in the futurist poetry of Marinetti . . . that is, an intent once again to conquer and control nature).

6. Newman is primarily concerned that ecocriticism is a benefit from certain Marxist principles, but for those who may be reluctant to engage ecocriticism he provides the
reminder that Marxism has always valued first and foremost the notion of an integrated process: “The fundamental processes of life include not only material production and reproduction, but also language, thought, ideas, the full range of signifying practices we study under the rubric of culture. Culture is neither mere reflection nor a determining structure, but is inextricably part of—both constituted by and constituting—the whole material process.” “The most effective analogy for this process,” he goes on, “comes from ecology: ideas are determined, shaped by the material social process in much the same way that the forms of life in an ecosystem are determined by its inorganic base” (15).

7. Both poststructuralism and deep ecology take a critical stance, looking to question the concepts upon which hegemonic hierarchies are constructed and both resist the notion of any center whatsoever. Campbell writes: “[The] most important shared premise of post-structuralist and ecological theory [is that] both criticize the traditional sense of a separate, independent, authoritative center of value or meaning; both substitute the idea of networks [. . .] there is no such things as a self-enclosed, private piece of property, neither a deer, nor a person, nor a text, nor a piece of land… human beings are no longer the center of value or meaning” (131, 133). Additionally, Newman and Campbell have each contributed greatly to the potential for considering a wide variety of works within an expanding definition of ecocriticism. The clear connection to Marxism and post-structuralism might encourage critics of Latin American literature to recognize that ecocriticism suggests a compatible, but unique concept of consciousness. By the same token, when a clear connection with the non-human world serves as a significant factor in the function of a work, it must be recognized.

8. Tag’s remarks continue: “Arguments about whether language represents the world, or whether it distances us from the world, sidetrack us from the more important things we have to learn about how language already functions within our experiences of the world. When we study the relationships between language and landscape, text and terrain, or words and woods, we are not studying two separate things (as if we lived in some dualistic universe), but interdependencies, particular manifestations (even processes) of the thing we call life.”

9. Proclaiming (still optimistically) himself as the one engaging the world poetically, the poet/creature Altazor is “aquel que todo lo ha visto, que conoce todos los secretos sin ser Walt Whitman, / pues jamás he tenido una barba blanca como las bellas enfermeras y los / arroyos helados” (383) (that one who has seen it all, that knows all the secrets without being Walt Whitman / never have I had a white beard like the beautiful nurses or the frozen streams).

10. Critical to the understanding of Huidobro’s transition from the aesthetics of modernismo to the more dynamic innovation of the vanguardia are the seminal studies of Goic (1955), de Costa (1975, 1975, 1978, 1984, and Introducción de Altazor, 1989), Cecil Wood (1978), Braulio Arenas (1964), and Cansino-Assens (1919). In all cases, scholars have tracked an evolution rather than a dramatic break, defining characteristics of Huidobro’s earliest work that would later evolve into the devout and clearly articulated creacionismo. De Costa’s various studies are most insistent regarding this matter. For his part, Cansino-Assens commented as early as 1919 that “En nuestra lírica no hay nada que pueda comparárseles [Huidobro’s first five books] ni siquiera las últimas modulaciones llanas de Juan Ramón Jiménez, ni las silvas diversiformes de los modernos versilbristas. Todas esas formas Vicente Huidobro las cultivó y superó ya en sus últimos libros anteriores Canciones en la noche, La gruta del silencio, El espejo de agua y Adán. En esos libros practicaba todas las variedades del verso, tal que se le modelaba hasta en las vísperas de su
evolución última” (121) (In our lyric there is nothing that compares to Huidobro, not the latest modulations of Juan Ramón Jiménez nor the multiform silvas of the modernist free verse poets. Vicente Huidobro cultivated all those forms and even surpassed them in his latest books Canciones en la noche, La gruta del silencio, El espejo de agua y Adán. In those books he employed all varieties of verse, such that he was molded by them right up until the eve of his final evolution).

11. Like Huidobro, Gerardo Diego is not interested in the idea that the poet would depose and/or become God. His article “Poesía y creacionismo de Vicente Huidobro (1968)” first acknowledges his close working relationship with the Chilean, as a fellow creacionista: “Vicente Huidobro y su poesía es, continua siendo, en mi vida y en mi pasión por la poesía, algo especial, algo que forma parte de mí mismo” (209) (Vicente Huidobro and his poetry are, continue to be, in my life and in my passion for poetry, something special, something that forms a very part of me). He then humbly insists upon the manner in which the creationist poem depends on Nature: “Una invención, un invento, no es nada más que un hallazgo. Este es el verdadero sentido de la palabra. Todo está ya en la Naturaleza y el hombre no hace más que descubrirlo, encontrarlo” (221) (An invention is nothing more than a discovery. This is the true meaning of the word. Everything is already present in Nature and man does nothing more than discover it, encounter it).

12. All translations cited from this poem are by Jorge García-Gómez.

13. All translations cited from this poem are by David M. Guss.

14. The theme of the disintegration of language in this poem is discussed by Gerardo Diego when relating the moment when Juan Ramón Jiménez encouraged the Spaniard to leave Huidobro out of a significant anthology. Diego highlights “Marino” and “Altazor” in his response, writing that “lo que sí pretendió la poesía creacionista fue y sigue siendo crear o inventar un sentido nuevo y una técnica nueva, aprendida en parte en la naturaleza misma” (221) (what creacionista poetry truly was and continues to be is the creation or invention of a new sense and a new technique, learned in part from nature itself).

15. All translations cited from Altazor are by Eliot Weinberger.

16. Within David Bary’s analysis of the divine parody, the link established from one line to another creates a building creative intensity (288): “Plantar miradas como árboles / Enjaular árboles como pájaros / Regar pájaros como heliotropos / tocar un heliotropo como música” (406) (Plant glances like trees / Cage trees like birds / Water birds like heliotropes / Play a heliotrope like music). Goic’s analysis of the section, and the idea of “demasiada poesía” (too much poetry) refers again to the difference between imitation and creation, a commentator and a magician: “Como se ve, el poeta condenado a muerte es el tradicionalmente llamado así, ese comentador de las cosas, como dirá despreciativamente Huidobro, quien proclamará, en su reemplazo, al mago” (1955: 232) (As can be seen, the poet condemned to death is the one traditionally called such, commentator of things, as Huidobro will say pejoratively, later proclaiming the magician as his replacement).

17. See de Costa (both from 1975 and also from 1978) as well as Schweitzer, Perdigó, and Goic.

18. Jonathan Bate’s groundbreaking work of ecocriticism The Song of the Earth (2002) explores the magical and nourishing relationship between humans and the non-human world. While he focuses on Romanticism, his notion of ecopoiesis celebrates the poet’s active and creative cohabitation with the world in place of a static pastoral imitation.

19. Two opposite approaches to the poetics of collapse, or the collapse of poetics, depending on our point of view, are found in the work of Federica Schopf and David
Bary, for example. As mentioned earlier in this article, Schopf’s entire thesis hinges on the concept of intentional demolition of the language. He begins: “La tesis que sostengo es que, para el sujeto (anti)poético de Altazor, la destrucción del la lengua—no sólo su desconstrucción, que es razonada—conduce a la nueva poesía: el acto de destrucción permite el surgimiento de los significantes de la poesía intentada en el poema” (5) (The thesis I maintain is that, for the (anti)poetic subject of Altazor, the destruction of language—not just its reasoned deconstruction—leads to new poetry; the act of destruction permits the emergence of the signifiers of the kind of poetry intended in the poem). He later puts together a “recopilación de materiales para la Nueva Poesia” (compilation of materials for Nueva Poesía). Among four major elements of Huidobro’s poetry he highlights “La utilización paródica (carnavalesca, sarcástica) de formas poéticas anteriores, incluidas algunas formas rupturistas del vanguardismo” (the parodic (carnivalesque, sarcastic) use earlier poetic forms, including some forms of rupture from the vanguard) and “La demolición intencional del lenguaje” (intentional demolition of language).

David Bary, on the other hand, has undertaken many studies of Huidobro and his contributions concerning parody of the divine in Huidobro are excellent. In a separate study based more on Huidobro’s public personality, Bary attacks Huidobro as demonstrating “egoísmo infantil” (infantile egotism), as cited earlier. Bary cites Juan Larrea’s letters to Huidobro and criticism of the Chilean’s public presence, but then bases further accusations on a theory that Huidobro’s supposed egotism somehow reflects an essence of being Hispanic. Commenting on everything from the Spanish mystics to Mexican busses, Bary implies that the manner in which Huidobro “anhela expresar directamente la realidad” (longs to express reality directly) demonstrates a lofty aspiration befitting of his cultural (if not racial) heritage. As we consider in this study, the metapoetry itself, constantly narrating its own demolition, clearly supports Schopf’s thesis (and that of Yudice, Camurati, Diego, Concha and others).

20. Enrique Anderson-Imbert, for example, in his oft-cited Historia de la Literatura Hispanoamericana, mentions the question of Huidobro’s own claim to being “Padre del creacionismo” (Father of creacionismo), conceding that Huidobro “fue uno de los primeros poetas de nuestra lengua que se puso en la vanguardia de la literatura europea” (54) (was one of the first poets of our language to be part of the European vanguard).

21. All translations cited from this poem are by David M. Guss.

22. All translations cited from this poem are by David M. Guss.

23. All translations cited from this poem are by W.S. Merwin.

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Cosmic Impacts and Quantum Uncertainties: *Altazor* and the Fall “From” Reference

Scott Weintraub

Vicente Huidobro’s long poem *Altazor* (1931) is an avant-garde exploration of language that narrates a series of linguistic, critical, allegorical, and gravitational “falls” in such a way as to map out the trajectory of the falling protagonist’s “viaje en paracaídas” (voyage in parachute).\(^1\) We can locate or situate the impact of a referentially and discursively significant “event” in the poem’s theoretical configurations of falling and gravitation, in the work of this celestial poet indelibly linked to cosmological spaces and the linguistic fluctuations that give them shape. In light of *Altazor’s* extra-terrestrial deconstructions, numerous critical studies have described the poem’s reconfiguration of a fall “from” the referentiality of the linguistic sign via the material fall “of” language itself. To address this logic from the space of cosmology itself, we might examine *Altazor’s* haunting referential structures in order to read how its multiple, disarticulated chains of signification register a celestial and quantum event that is unpredictable and unanticipated, manifest throughout Huidobro’s poem and particularly evident in the radical textuality that comes in the poem’s famous final “gasp.”

This essay, then, reconsiders the impact of a linguistic event in *Altazor’s* gravitational field by first reconsidering myriad critical approaches to the issue of the poem’s “illegible,” ambiguous conclusion via an examination of the scientific imaginary that the poem shares with important discoveries in theoretical and experimental physics in the first few decades of the twentieth century. By engaging the historical context of the quantum/relativistic paradigm shift in physics that was contemporary to the poem’s composition, I will explore the ways in which *Altazor* in and of itself marks the historical and discursive passage between Newtonian and quantum cosmovisions. *Altazor’s* meaning-making activities, read with respect to quantum and cosmological concerns, show how Huidobro’s long poem traces out the falling motion of a linguistic and cosmic event that, nevertheless, is horizon-less and radically heterogeneous in nature—a facet of the poem that is indicative of the kinds of quantum fluctuations whose “path” can not be accurately predicted or described with total certainty or mastery. The critical
journey upon which this essay embarks, then, does not necessarily mirror the “viaje en paracaídas” to which Altazor’s title alludes. Rather, I’ve tried to “measure” and “observe” the heterogeneous, quantum textualities that structure and at the same time destabilize Huidobro’s poetic/cosmological explorations—moving from reflections on the explicit linguistic analysis that predominates in readings of the poem, to the cosmic structures read through the text’s multifarious falling motion, to its radical, referential aberrations, to the impact of a traumatic event in the Latin American and avant-garde poetic traditions.

The question of language and its progressive “breakdown” in Altazor is not a new line of inquiry—it is an issue explored in depth by critics such as Guillermo Sucre, Saúl Yurkievich, Octavio Paz, George Yúdice, Cedomil Goic, and René de Costa, in particular. And reading the trajectory of Altazor’s fall “in” language in terms of a dialectic of triumph and/or failure is, in fact, an endeavor well accounted for in the lengthy bibliography on Huidobro’s long poem. Sucre, for example, does not quite consider Altazor to be a failed poem; he sees it as speaking from the very presence of failure in order to demonstrate the impossibility of aspiring to the absolute:

Altazor no es un poema fracasado, sino, lo que es muy distinto, el poema del fracaso. Insisto: no sobre sino del fracaso; no un comentario alrededor del fracaso, sino su presencia misma. Uno de sus valores (y de sus riesgos, por supuesto) reside en este hecho: haber ilustrado con su escritura misma la desmesura y la imposibilidad de una aspiración de absoluto. (107)

In a somewhat similar vein, Yúdice suggests that the new language arising from the ashes at the end of the seventh canto constitutes the triumph of the polyvalent “fallen” word in its simultaneous death and resurrection of language:

El final de Altazor, no carece de sentido; tampoco tiene solamente un sentido unívoco. En este poema se pretende resumir y superar la historia de la poesía tal como la mistifica Huidobro. De ahí las citas de código de la trascendencia vacua, del código de la ruptura y de los muchos códigos intertextuales. Al final del poema se llega al punto crítico de la creación poética; toda poesía anterior a Altazor es una aproximación asintótica a la palabra absoluta, pero este nunca llegar al absoluto es, en efecto, un fracaso. Huidobro transforma este fracaso en un triunfo; la palabra altazoriana es a la vez muerte y resurrección del lenguaje. (211)
Altazor’s end is not without meaning; nor does it have a single, univocal meaning. This poem aims to summarize and overcome the history of poetry via Huidobro’s mystification. Hence the citations of codes of empty transcendence, codes of rupture, and many intertextual codes. The end of the poem arrives at the critical point of poetic creation; all poetry prior to Altazor is an asymptotic approach to the absolute word, but this never arriving at the absolute is, in effect, a failure. Huidobro transforms this failure into a triumph; the Altazorian word is simultaneously the death and resurrection of language.

Paz also considers Altazor to be simultaneously failure and triumph, incarnate in the moment in which “el poeta despoja paulatinamente al lenguaje de su carga de significaciones y en los últimos cantos las palabras aspiran no a significar sino a ser: sílabas que son sonajas que son semillas. [. . .] El viaje por el unipacio y el espaverso de Huidobro es la historia de la ascensión del sentido al ser [. . .] [que] termina en triunfo” (12) (the poet slowly removes the charge of meanings from language and in the final cantos the words do not strive to signify, but rather to be; syllables that are rattles that are seeds. [. . .] The voyage through Huidobro’s unimos and the cosverse is the history of the ascension from meaning to being [. . .] [that] ends in triumph).

Rather than throw another straw on this particular (proverbial) camel haunting the larger scope of Huidobro criticism, I would like to think through the myriad critical perspectives on the disarticulated, syllabic utterances at the “conclusion” of Altazor’s Canto VII in terms of the way in which the poem “ends up,” thereby treating its final enunciations in terms of their cosmic and traumatic eventhood. From a critical perspective, we might say that there is a strong impulse to orient Altazor’s poetic experimentation with respect to the temporal configurations of high vanguardismo, given Huidobro’s dating of its composition between 1919 and 1931. Literary historioriography, in a sense, shows the way in which the radicality of Altazor’s poetic project closes off the so-called period of radical experimentation in the Latin American poetic avant-gardes (Quiroga 1996: 314), thus marking the impact of a heterogeneous poetic event that was clearly felt throughout the Latin American literary canon. But this historiographical reflection, in turn, reveals how this “neat” (meta)textual gesture is structured, in part, as an allegory of Altazor’s voyage—especially given the way in which numerous textual analyses align Altazor’s fall in language with the progressive destruction of the Spanish linguistic system, thereby teleologically orienting “his” rapid descent as a function of the progression from the Preface to Canto VII.3 I tend to be a bit suspicious of some of the metaphysical terminology deployed by some Huidobro critics in the anticipation of what I read as the radical coming of something wholly “other” in language. To take just a few examples of what I mean by “metaphysical” approximations (that nonetheless constitute valuable
contributions to studies on Huidobro’s writing), Paz suggests that “el lenguaje del canto final de Altazor ha alcanzado la dignidad suprema: la del pleno ser” (13) (the language of Altazor’s final canto has achieved the highest dignity: that of being itself); Yúdice describes the basic myth of Altazor in terms of the miracle of “ese lenguaje antipoético y autorreferencial del último canto, lenguaje nuevo nacido de las cenizas del lenguaje destruido. Así el contexto de la literatura de ruptura no deja de tener significancia para la lectura de la obra; en efecto, Altazor pretende resumir toda esa literatura y superarla llevando el proceso de ruptura a su máxima conclusión” (184) (that antipoetic and autoreferential language of the final canto, new language born from the ashes of language destroyed. Thus the context of literature of rupture does not stop being significant for readings of the work; in effect, Altazor aims to summarize and overcome that literature by bringing the procedure of rupture to its ultimate conclusion).

An “in kind” approach to Altazor’s radical textual spaces, on the other hand, might be elaborated through a discussion of the horizon-less nature of what comes, an event whose horizon of expectation cannot be anticipated. Jacques Derrida, in his insightful discussion of the non-temporal “futurity” of that which is “to-come,” suggests that:

Whenever a telos or teleology comes to orient, order, and make possible a historicity, it annuls that historicity by the same token and neutralizes the unforeseeable and incalculable irruption, the singular and exceptional alterity of what [ce qui] comes, or indeed of who [qui] comes, that without which, or the one without whom, nothing happens or arrives. (Rogues 128)

Despite the teleological orientation of readings of Altazor that inscribe the poem’s falling motion in a ruin-or utopian-seeking narrative, I think that the cosmological poetics of Altazor perhaps offer a different scenario that would account for the haunting linguistic and quantum uncertainties at play in Huidobro’s poem. Specifically, I am interested in the multifarious, referentially aberrant “falls”—linguistic, allegorical, and gravitational—that situate Altazor at the limit of the move from classical physics to our current quantum worldview.

I would like to focus, for a moment, on this trope of falling and its relationship with the eventhood of Altazor’s radical poetic experimentation. The falling motion enacted in Altazor is thematically and discursively initiated in the Preface, in which the protagonist takes hold of his parachute, falling “de sueño en sueño por los espacios de la muerte” (55) (from dream to dream through the spaces of death). The indissoluble link between death and falling, of course, has biblical resonances, but also plays into Nietzschean-Zarathustran analogies, as well as Heidegger’s fundamental ontology of Dasein’s Being-towards-death—readings of Altazor that have
been well-established in the bibliography on Huidobro. But following a ludic encounter with the Creator shortly after embarking on his journey, Altazor hears how the Creator “[creó] la lengua de la boca que los hombres desviaron de su rol, haciéndola aprender a hablar . . . a ella, ella, la bella nadadora, desviada para siempre de su rol acuático y puramente acariciador” (56) (“created the tongue of the mouth which man diverted from its role to make it learn to speak . . . to her, to her, the beautiful swimmer, forever diverted from her aquatic and purely sensual role”). This description of humankind’s deviation from what the oceanic fluidity of language was supposedly “intended” to do is interesting, in and of itself, from several critical standpoints—and thus fits snugly with critical approaches that discuss the demythification of language via multiple linguistic ruptures that aspire to bring about the absolute correspondence between the word and the thing-in-itself, signifier and signified, etc. But I think it is noteworthy that this question of humankind’s duplicitous relationship with language immediately sets Altazor’s fall into motion, insofar as the Creator states:

creé la lengua de la boca que los hombres desviaron de su rol, haciéndola aprender a hablar . . . a ella, ella, la bella nadadora, desviada para siempre de su rol acuático y puramente acariciador.
Mi paracaídas empezó a caer vertiginosamente. Tal es la fuerza de atracción de la muerte y del sepulcro abierto. (56)

(I created the tongue of the mouth which man diverted from its role to make it learn to speak . . . to her, to her, the beautiful swimmer, forever diverted from her aquatic and purely sensual role.
My parachute began to dizzyingly drop. Such is the force of the attraction of death, of the open grave.)

This “vertiginous” fall highlights the strong gravitational forces that structure Altazor’s cosmic spaces, and anticipates the significant, hierarchical-evolutionary classification towards the end of the “Prefacio:”

Hombre, he ahí tu paracaídas maravilloso como el vértigo.
Poeta, he ahí tu paracaídas, maravilloso como el imán del abismo.
Mago, he ahí tu paracaídas que una palabra tuya puede convertir en un parasubidas maravilloso como el relámpago que quisiera cegar al creador. (60)

(Here’s your parachute, Man, wonderful as vertigo.
Here’s your parachute, Poet, wonderful as the charm of the chasm.
Here’s your parachute, Magician, which one word of yours can transform into a parashoot, wonderful as the lightning bolt that tries to blind the creator.)
Man’s parachute, described here as “wonderful as vertigo” (11), highlights the attraction of masses via gravitation, while the attractive, magnetized potential of the abyss pulling on the Poet’s parachute further develops the physical properties of Altazor’s extra-planetary exploration. However, it is through the Magician’s apparently creacionista abilities that we might approach the problematic relationship between the empirical reality of falling bodies and the linguistic system that purports to describe them—an issue that is clearly one of Altazor’s central critical preoccupations. The Magician’s verbal-antigravity operations can transform parachute to “parashoot” (11) in such a way as to simultaneously reverse the gravitational pull of Earth or of other celestial bodies, and also the tropological trajectory of his fall “in” or “through” language. In this way, Altazor, significantly doubled in Canto IV as “Vicente antipoeta y mago” (95) (Vicente antipoet and magician) will launch his falling body into the depths of space in an irregular trajectory defying the fundamentals of gravitational and linguistic forces.

One possible approach to the commingling of linguistic and cosmological uncertainty in Altazor is through a series of theoretical reflections—contemporary to the poem’s composition—on the question of gravity. In terms of the dissemination of important scientific discoveries related to gravitation and relativity in Latin America in the first part of the twentieth century, Albert Einstein, in his 1925 visit to Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil, suggested in his journals that while he was consistently underwhelmed by the level of scientific engagement he found, in Argentina he at least encountered a community of physicists receptive to his findings (Glick 878–886). And in Chile, a 1928 visit by French physicist Paul Langevin sparked collective curiosity about current work in quantum physics and relativity, and was accompanied by numerous conferences by Chilean Professors Ramón Salas Edwards and Pablo Krassa on topics such as quantum theory, relativity, and experimental physics. And while Huidobro himself traveled extensively between Chile, Argentina, Spain, France, and the United States between 1916 and 1931 (settling at different times in Madrid, Paris, Barcelona, and New York, among other cities), a scientific-philological reading of Altazor and relativity yields some interesting results. In the first Canto, the falling poet describes the way in which his loneliness is affected by “el paso de las estrellas que se alejan” (63) (the footsteps of stars slipping away), which thematically evokes Altazor’s growing solitude in the retreating firmament, but also suggests cognizance of the expanding universe. The notion of cosmic expansion and inflation—based on a series of solutions to Einstein’s field equations of general relativity (1915), first proved mathematically by Alexander Friedman (1922), and subsequently confirmed experimentally by Edwin Hubble (1929)—relies on the flexibility of space and time to suggest that the
fabric of space itself is in fact stretching (Greene 229–33). This radical change to our cosmovision is significant, since it uses general relativity to explain the simultaneous expansion of time and space (as space-time) in such a way as to highlight the lack of a “special or unique location that is the center from which the outward motion is expanding” (Greene 232). Along these lines, we might think through Canto IV’s urgent, repeated insistence on there being “no time to lose” (No hay tiempo que perder) as situating *Altazor’s* fall in the “midst” of the paradigm shift proper to relativity’s coming into its own by the 1920s. It thus bears witness to Einstein’s notion of time dilation for objects in relative motion (moving at different velocities with respect to each other), thereby showing how since there is in fact “no time to lose,” we must “play outside of time” (Jugamos fuera del tiempo) (118), that is, “outside” of time since time in and of itself isn’t “in time” or in-sync in the flux of a world post-relativity. In essence, then, *Altazor* engages the question of relativity by highlighting the impossibility of an absolute notion of time and space shared by all observers, a scenario in which there can be no unconditional measure of timeliness on a universal scale.

Another important component of this “scientific revolution,” to use Thomas Kuhn’s influential terminology, can be found in further developments and debates in theoretical and experimental physics in the early part of the twentieth century. It is important to note that these discoveries did not merely initiate a shift in thinking in a scientific-academic context; rather, as Alicia Rivero suggests, “Einstein’s relativity and the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics presented a new worldview, which reconceptualized time, space and other aspects of classical physics, while metamorphosing the art, literature and philosophy of the twentieth century” (137). In a more dramatic fashion, founding father of abstract art Wassily Kandinsky claimed that in the context of quantum physics’ radical overthrow of the classical universe, “the collapse of the atom model was equivalent, in my soul, to the collapse of the whole world. Suddenly the thickest walls fell. I would not have been amazed if a stone appeared before my eye in the air, melted, and became invisible” (Randall 117). Kandinsky’s remarks are a bit hyperbolic, but there were indeed some “spooky” findings released during this time. In particular, the widely accepted Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, based largely on Werner Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle (stating that there are limits to the accuracy with which a particle’s position and momentum may be measured) and Niels Bohr’s work on the wave-particle duality of light, profoundly called into question the certainty purportedly guaranteeing the classical worldview.

In the Newtonian universe—whose laws of motion still adequately describe objects not extremely massive nor moving very fast—one could
account for the trajectory of Altazor’s fall, for example, by possessing sufficient information about all involved particles and heavenly bodies. In the context of this paradigm shift, one of the issues at play in the system of particles that interact in Altazor’s celestial fluctuations is a related question of uncertainty at the molecular level, described by the so-called “butterfly effect” in chaos theory. This is a perspective that examines the supposition that the initial conditions of a system (i.e. a change in wind patterns caused by a butterfly flapping its wings) can greatly influence subsequent outcomes (thereby causing a tornado halfway across the globe). Brian Greene highlights a similar meteorological analogy in the Newtonian worldview, since according to the classical universe, “if we knew in complete detail the state of the environment (the positions and velocities of every one of its particulate ingredients), we would be able to predict (given sufficient calculational prowess) with certainty whether it will rain at 4:07 p.m. tomorrow” (91). I think that this theoretical reflection has something in common with specific questions of correspondence posed by Altazor in Canto IV, in terms of the poem’s exploration of the epistemological, poetic, and probabilistic limits of certainty in a quantum world. Huidobro writes:

Qué hace la golondrina que vi esta mañana
¿Firmando cartas en el vacío?
Cuando mueve el pie izquierdo
¿Qué hace con su pie el gran mandarín chino?
Cuando enciende un cigarro
¿Qué hacen los otros cigarros que vienen en el barco?
¿En dónde está la planta del fuego futuro?
Y si yo levanto los ojos ahora mismo
¿Qué hace con sus ojos el explorador de pie en el polo?
Yo estoy aquí
¿En dónde están los otros?
Eco de gesto en gesto
Cadena electrizada o sin correspondencias
Interrumpido el ritmo solitario
¿Quiénes se están muriendo y quiénes nacen
Mientras mi pluma corre en el papel? (101)

(What’s that swallow doing the one I saw this morning
Signing letters in space?
When I move my left foot
What does the great Chinese mandarin do with his foot?
When I light a cigarette
What happens to the other cigarettes that came on the boat?
Where is the leaf of the future fire?
And if I raise my eyes just now
What’s the explorer on foot to the pole doing with his eyes?
I am here
Where are the others?
Act echoes act
A chain electrified or with no connections
A solitary rhythm interrupted
Who’s dying and who’s been born
While my pen runs across the paper?

This somewhat tragic-comic (or at least idiosyncratic) examination of cause and effect interrogates the interconnected certainty of the classical world, but at the same time it interchanges the linked, “cadena electrizada” (chain electrified) for a world “sin correspondencias” (with no connections). This move very much shifts attention to the way in which this solitary rhythm is interrupted, rather than is temporally constituted as rhythm in and of itself, in such a way as to parody poems like the famous “Correspondances” sonnet by French poet Charles Baudelaire, as well as the larger tropological engagement with harmony and correspondences in Latin American modernista poets such as José Martí and, particularly, Rubén Darío. So not only does this move engage a worldview in which the position and momentum of a given particle can only be expressed in terms of a probability wave—and not a concrete set of coordinates—but also the kind of quantum “entanglement” so despised by Einstein. The German physicist continuously protested against “spooky-action-at-a-distance” linking particles at great distances purported to “exist” by quantum physics. To say that two particles are “entangled” describes a phenomenon by way of which initially “identical” particles, when separated to great distances, inevitably still show the same essential properties and behaviors when one is acted upon—despite the “ultimate” limit of the speed of light for the transmission of information. This counter-intuitive principle very much shapes the kinds of ironic correspondences explored in this fourth Canto, between these echoed acts that nevertheless are simultaneously disconnected from one another.

Altazor’s multifarious fall, then, marks the lacunae that separate Newtonian and quantum cosmovisions. The post-classical underpinnings of Altazor highlight the “spooky” cosmological and mathematical structures at play in its celestial space as unanticipated and uncertain with respect to the falling motion the text enacts in its seven-canto journey. My insistence on that which is “unanticipated” or “horizon-less” is a product of my conviction that the kind of reading that purports to account for Altazor’s eventhood by constructing a teleological edifice upon which to ground itself is not taking to task the quantum and radically singular verbal fluctuations that come at the end of the poem. Inscribing Altazor’s fall in the context of the uncertainties of a “quantum” poetics, however, treats the radical nature of the event in terms of its own unanticipated coming, therefore thinking through the fundamentally unpredictable falling motion without engaging a
necessarily “classical” or teleological positionality. Along these lines, I think that a “Newtonian” reading of Altazor would map onto the teleological undercurrents that would efface the singularity of that which is to-come, that which comes in the disarticulated syllables at the poem’s “conclusion.” My “quantized” assessment of the trajectory of Altazor’s fall, on the other hand, thus marks where the poem “ends up” in its atomic, cosmological and linguistic uncertainty.

A particular “measurement” of Altazor’s meta-linguistic, discursive, and cosmological impact can be calculated in the verbal and chemical decomposition registering the event of a meteorite’s celestial trajectory in Canto IV:

Aquí yace Altazor azor fulminado por la altura
Aquí yace Vicente antipoeta y mago
Ciego sería el que llorara
Ciego como el cometa que va con su bastón
Y su neblina de ánimas que lo siguen
Obediente al instinto de sus sentidos
Sin hacer caso de los meteoros que apedrean desde lejos
Y viven en colonias según la temporada
El meteoro insolente cruza por el cielo
El meteplata el metecobre
El metepiedras en el infinito
Meteópalos en la Mirada. (108–09)

(Here lies Altazor hawk exploded by the altitude
Here lies Vicente antipoet and magician
He who weeps will be blind
Blind as the comet that travels with its staff
And its mist of souls that follow it
Instinctively obedient to its wishes
Never minding the meteoroids that pelt from afar
And live in colonies according to the seasons
The insolent meteoroids cross the sky
The meteojoid the meteotoid
The meteovoids in the infinite
The meteonoid in a glance.)

This cosmological series initiates linguistic deconstructions, following the progressive fragmentation of a series of proper names—Marcelo into “mar” and “cielo” (sea and sky), Clarisa into “clara” and “risa” (clear and laugh), as well as Alejandro into “antro” and “alejado” (95) (alas under all), among others—and also reveals the origin of Altazor’s name as deriving from the celestial and the avian, “altura” (height) and “azor” (hawk). It is interesting, however, that while the breakdown of names initiates aural echoes and visual stutters through a kind of paronomasistic operation, the only name not
deconstructed is “Vicente,” obviously invoking Huidobro himself, the anti-poet whose creacionista verse leaves no trace or echo. By aligning his own poetic prowess with the magician of the Preface, we can see how the anti-poetic gaze tries to resist the kind of deconstructive operations to which the other proper names are subject. Nevertheless, the progression from the proper to the common in this passage—from “Marcelo” to “meteoro,” for example”—only serves to dramatize the way in which the proper name in and of itself must necessarily function with respect to the same set of differentials that structures and at the same time destabilizes language. As Geoffrey Bennington suggests in the context of Jacques Derrida’s work:

[The proper name] is the keystone of logocentrism [. . .] What is called by the generic common noun “proper name” must function, it too, in a system of differences: this or that proper name rather than another designates this or that individual rather than another and thus is marked by the trace of these others, in a classification (GL, 86b, 137a), if only a two-term classification [. . .] For there to be a truly proper name, there would have to be only one proper name, which would then not even be a name, but pure appellation of the pure other, absolute vocative (cf. EO, 107–08; GR, 110–11; WD, 105), which would not even call, for calling implies distance and différence, but would be proffered in the presence of the other, who would in that case not even be other. (105)

This (im)proper act of naming shows the name’s parallel descent with celestial objects such as comets, stars, and, perhaps, most significantly, meteors. Insofar as Altazor’s ludic language games permit the material treatment of “meteoro” (meteor) as if it were a combination of “mete” (from the verb “meter,” “to insert”) and “oro” (gold), what is “produced” here are chemical-verbal reactions that add silver (plata), copper (cobre), more generic rocks (piedras) and, finally, opals (ópalos). René de Costa reads this transposition in terms of its comic effect—“but effects are not causes, and here humor functions to point up the polyvalent nature of language, its potential for generating meanings according to context” (1984: 156)—but in fact its cosmic effect shows the way in which the linguistic and the cosmological do not converge according to the physical properties of nature. These “meteoro [. . .] / meteplata [. . .] / metecobre [. . .] / metepiedras [. . .] / meteópalos” are, in and of themselves, falling, so to speak, but not necessarily “towards” Earth as a function of the gravitational attraction between physical bodies, but rather in language.

From a referential standpoint, this “meteoro” example brings out a suggestive series of convergences between Altazor’s quantum/cosmological spookiness and the question of the poem’s constituent “literariness.” The paradigm shift that marked the move from what could be called “pre-quantum” writing to the kinds of cosmological poetics at play in Altazor reflects the way in which language, in and of itself, always already stages
these kinds of uncertainties. To take a particularly suggestive treatment of linguistic uncertainty from contemporary literary theory, Paul de Man describes the tense relationship between the empirical reality of the physical world and the material nature of language by highlighting how literature is fiction not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge “reality,” but because it is not a priori certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are like those, of the phenomenal world. It is therefore not a priori certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language. (11)

De Man goes on to emphasize the dangers in confusing “the materiality of the signifier with the materiality of what it signifies,” since “no one in his right mind will try to grow grapes by the luminosity of the word ‘day’” (11). De Man’s differentiation between the empirical reality of the physical world and the material nature of language is, of course, humorously phrased, but is nevertheless indicative of the way in which language’s “measurement” of the empirical world is necessarily imprecise. In a way, the multiple “falls” that (metaphorically) encompass language’s own interstices and slippages thus can be brought to converge upon the curious links between the quantum and the linguistic in Altazor. This is not to suggest that there was ever a moment of perfect, Edenic correspondence between the word and the thing-in-itself—which is an allegorical “fall” that has been read into Altazor’s potential search for pure language. Rather, I think that a suggestive approach to the multifarious nature of “falling” present in Altazor’s quantum explorations can be found in a close interrogation of the traumatic impact of multiple linguistic and gravitational events in Huidobro’s poem.

In an essay on tropes of falling in Paul de Man’s critical writings, Cathy Caruth offers a useful way to think through the way in which the relationship between phenomena and language in the Newtonian universe in and of itself became problematic—a viewpoint that, as we have seen, would engender further crises of signification in the wake of relativity and quantum mechanics. Caruth describes how de Man’s reading of Heinrich von Kliest’s “antigravitational puppets” in the “Über das Marionettentheater” brings out a crucial disjunction between the referential properties of language and the phenomenal materiality of Newton’s mathematical representation of the law of gravity: “with the introduction of gravitation, the only thing that was adequate to the world was, paradoxically, that which didn’t refer (mathematics); and what did refer, language, could no longer describe the world. In a world of falling, reference could not adequately describe the world” (Caruth 76). Kliest’s puppets dance in such a way as to elude the problem of referentiality “in a formal, quantified system that is as predictable, and ultimately nonspecific—or nonreferential—as a mathematics” (81). Where Caruth reads de Man reading in terms of the
performative force of language’s manifestation as materiality, she observes that “philosophy must, and yet cannot, fully integrate a dimension of language that not only shows, or represents, but acts [. . .] It is paradoxically in this deathlike break, or resistance to phenomenal knowledge, that the system will encounter the resistance, de Man suggests, of reference” (87). The breaks and “discontinuities” in reference, in fact, permit the engendering of meaning as “force disarticulates the system as it attempts to distinguish and unify empirical and conceptual discourse, that is, to know itself as independent of empirical referents” (Caruth 88). These falls, inadequately represented linguistically, show how theory and reading are therefore the falling motion itself, propagated by this force that materializes the resistance to reference.

The discontinuity between equations that account for the motion of falling objects and the linguistic elements that describe them shows the allegorical incongruity that “regulates” the way in which language functions. But as early-twentieth-century discoveries in quantum theory can attest—not to mention current engagement by such varied topics as superstring theory, M-theory, loop quantum gravity, twistor theory, etc.—the attractive force of gravity described by Newton does not quite account for the kinds of things that happen to bodies in motion. The sheer discursive weight of discoveries like Einstein’s theory of relativity, Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, and light’s wave-particle duality, among others, speak to a paradigm shift from the classical universe to the quantum/post-relativity worldview, that, as we have seen, is registered in its eventhood in Altazor’s radical poetic textuality.

Part and parcel of Altazor’s traumatic event—whose impact resounded rather noisily in the Latin American poetic canon—is the (in)famous coming of Canto VII’s ultimate, disarticulated syllables, in which Altazor registers its “final” falls and fluctuations, its gasps and its phoenix-like resurrectory throes (if we are to follow Paz, Yúdice, et al). In light of our quantum-cosmological reading, we might (re)consider how the poem “ends up” in its non-referential utterances—and not necessarily what it “means” or what is “concluding” here (in the etymological sense of “shutting,” “closing,” or “confining”) (Conclude):

Semperiva
ivarisa tarirá
Campanudio lalafí
Auriciento auronida
Lalafí
io ia
i i o
Ai ai ai a i i i o ia. (138)
(Livfrever
Lefdalafda dadeedah
Rather than closing off signification through a hermeneutic deciphering of word-fragments in this passage—which would bring out varied, golden textualities (“aur-”), laughter (“-risa”), and eternity (“semper”), to name just three—we can say that the visual layout of these verses closely resembles prosody in Spanish, and at the same time “ends” with a chain of vowels that approximates some sort of voiced, guttural utterance. But in the context of Altazor’s quantum uncertainties, these final lines represent a “sample” observation of the poem’s quantum fluctuations—that is, a selection among possible combinations of linguistic elements (letters, accented vowels, and spaces, unfolded in a particular visual arrangement on the page) that mark changes in “energy” whose probability can be calculated with respect to Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. These “ends” in and of themselves are indicative of the kinds of boundaries and limits that destabilize Altazor’s discursive frontiers, insofar as it is a poem that, paradoxically, at one point professes to “measure the infinite step by step” (79) and see “Beyond the last horizon” (81), thus calling into question the limit-experience of the frontier itself. These borders are only borders, so to speak, if in fact they are always already potentially transgressed with no horizon of expectation—hence the quantum “spookiness” of Altazor’s heterogeneous textual/cosmological poetics, and its horizon-less radical coming in the “terminal” canto. Divested of a metaphysics of presence that would negate the radicality of this non-communicative linguistic event, the quantum measurement of Altazor’s textual space thus hints at the traumatic impact of this “ending,” this non-referential moment—textually, (meta)critically, as well as in the larger space of the global avant-gardes. And, ultimately, what arrives in Altazor’s uncertain, final fluctuations is the mapping out of a particular path, essentially a complex, verbal wave function made to “choose” an outcome among myriad possibilities.

Notes

1. This article is for Luis Correa-Díaz, poet, cosmonaut, and celestial wanderer.
2. All translations of critical work on Altazor are mine; all translations of Altazor itself are by Eliot Weinberger.
3. Notably, translator Eliot Weinberger questions the efficacy of critical approaches that read Altazor’s fall as a function of Icarus-like/Christian allegories (x), which in turn casts doubt on the teleological structuring of the move through space in Altazor.
4. See de Costa, Dussuel, Goic, Quiroga, Sucre, and Yúdice, in particular.
5. Huidobro’s creacionismo, an avant-garde aesthetic movement of limited transcendence in the 1910s and 20s, essentially glorified poetic and artistic activity as one of pure creation in the face of all previous artistic traditions’ imitation of Nature, the actions of man, etc. See Huidobro’s numerous, insistent manifestos for self-authorized valorizations of the creacionista project.
6. Eduardo L. Ortiz has written on the reception of relativity in Argentina—see “The Transmission of Science from Europe to Argentina and its Impact on Literature: From Lugones to Borges” and “A Convergence of Interests: Einstein’s Visit to Argentina in 1925.”
7. Although I have been unable to determine the depth of Huidobro’s engagement with these revolutions occurring in physics, there is ample evidence of an active scientific community in Chile concerned with the new discoveries. See Gutiérrez and Gutiérrez for a discussion of the history of the development of physics in Chile from the start of the Republic until 1960.
8. On the reception of relativity in Europe, see in particular Michel Bieuzinski (“Einstein’s Reception in Paris in 1922” and Thomas F. Glick (Einstein in Spain: Relativity and the Recovery of Science).
9. For a discussion of the nature of paradigm shifts in scientific thinking, see Kuhn’s seminal works The Structure of Scientific Revolutions and The Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought.
10. N. Katherine Hayles dates the advent of quantum mechanics to 1927, the year in which Werner Heisenberg formalized the uncertainty principle (The Cosmic Web 43).
11. See N. Katherine Hayles for a clear discussion of the non-linear dynamics of meteorology, insofar as tiny changes and fluctuations in non-linear systems can have large-scale effects (Chaos Bound 12).
12. The musical or rhythmic analogy recalls Edmund Husserl’s discussion of the perception of time-consciousness, insofar as a melody—heard as a succession of musical elements (rather than a simple series of isolated tones)—shows how the phenomenological account of the present brings with it past and future through retention and protention, respectively (Husserl 186).
13. The famous “EPR” (Einstein-Podalsky-Rosen 1935) paper, “Can Quantum-Mechanical Description of Physical Reality be Considered Complete?” is the historical touchstone for the supposed incompatibility of quantum indeterminacy with the classical/Newtonian view of the universe. This landmark article, however, would inevitably contribute to the advancement of quantum mechanics itself in a number of nuanced, complex ways, and would ultimately prove Einstein wrong.
14. Eliot Weinberger’s translation of Altazor, while excellent in general, loses the chemical and linguistic substitutions present in the original.
15. Alicia Rivero describes some of the issues linking quantum uncertainty, in particular, with quantum fiction in “Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle in Contemporary Spanish American Fiction” (Science and the Creative Imagination in Latin America).
16. These quantum fluctuations, in a way, anticipate the contents of the infinite library in Jorge Luis Borges’ short story “La biblioteca de Babel” (among other fantastic and simultaneously metaphysical writings by the Argentine author).
17. This larger Derridean argument can be found in several places in the French philosopher’s writings—particularly helpful here are Positions and Rogues, among other books.
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Huidobro and Parra: World-Class Antipoets

Dave Oliphant

With the publication in 1569–1589 of Alonso de Ercilla’s La Araucana, the poetry of Chile in Spanish originated with a major work that placed the country in the forefront of what would become an internationally acclaimed Hispanic New World literature. Thereafter, however, Chilean poetry of comparable significance would not for over three centuries emanate from the long, thin land of towering Andes mountains and soaring Pacific surf, whose native peoples Ercilla had celebrated in his epic poem, a work esteemed even by Cervantes in his Don Quijote. Not, in fact, until Vicente Huidobro published in 1916 his avant-garde El Espejo de agua (The Mirror of Water), and in 1931 his monumental Altazor, did Chile become, in terms of poetry, the leading post-Independence Latin American nation. As “Poeta / Anti poeta” and “antipoeta y mago” (Poet / Anti poet and antipoet and magician), Huidobro would decree in his “Manifesto Perhaps” that “THE GREAT DANGER TO THE POEM IS THE POETIC,” that to “add poetry to what has it already without you” is to pour honey on honey, “it’s sickening.” In his “antipoetry,” Huidobro replaces the “poetic” with a space-age “Gimnasia astral” (Astral gymnastics), and like the famous “pequeño Dios” (little God) of his “El espejo de agua,” he creates his own world and all that he says, careful as a “manicurist” not to glut his writing with descriptive words, since the adjective that does not give life, takes it away. With Altazor, Huidobro demonstrates in practice his theory of Creationism, a program for inverting the natural order of the universe. Instead of plagiarizing God by simply imitating nature, Huidobro plays “fuera del tiempo” (outside of time) and places in orbit his own planetary landscape, “fuera del mundo cotidiano” (outside the everyday world), in which the tree perches on a turtledove and the flower sucks a bee, rather than the other way around.

Huidobro’s program for a new poetry was, though the first, not the only meaningful development in Chilean poetry of the first part of the twentieth century. The era also saw the emergence of the vast metaphorical imagination of Huidobro’s fellow countryman, Pablo Neruda. Predictably, literary envy and invective erupted from the conflict between these two volcanic figures, as it did from the virulent clashes between Huidobro and another Chilean poet of the period, Pablo de Rokha. By 1938, a third major
poet had appeared on the Chilean scene, in the person of Nicanor Parra, who aligned himself more with Huidobro, descending from the latter to the extent that he too became a self-proclaimed antipoet.\(^5\) In a sense, being an “antipoeta” for Huidobro indicated his rejection of the poetry of all other poets. His declaration in Altazor, that he was “el único cantor de este siglo” (the only singer in this century), was in part a denial of the validity of Neruda’s cornucopia of nature-derived imagery.\(^6\) Yet in many ways, Huidobro, after his death in 1948, became the forgotten Adam of modern Chilean poetry, overwhelmed by Neruda’s deluge of book after book of undeniably imaginative metaphor-making—not that Huidobro had not already created an endless array of metaphors of his own in Canto V of Altazor, with its kaleidoscopic, transformed images of mill, moon, rainbow, and tomb, among many others.

With the publication in 1954 of Nicanor Parra’s Poemas y antipoemas, which avoids Neruda’s verbose, adjectival approach, the “second” Chilean antipoet perhaps helped to restore, first through his 1954 collection and later through his subsequent volumes of antipoems, something of the priority of Huidobro in the Chilean hierarchy.\(^7\) Certainly on January 10, 1993, the hundredth anniversary of Huidobro’s birth and almost forty years after the appearance of Poemas y antipoemas, Parra fully acknowledged the Creationist’s influence on his own antipoetry by delivering an eighty-four section antipoem-speech entitled “Also Sprach Altazor,” subsequently published in Parra’s Discursos de sobremesa of 2006.\(^8\) As an assessment of Huidobro’s contribution to Chilean letters and to Parra’s own thought and expression, “Also Sprach Altazor” reveals the lasting impact of Chile’s first great modernist writer on the next generation’s leading antipoetic “disciple,” as Parra would characterize his relationship with Huidobro in section three of his antipoem-speech.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the farsighted French observer of the nineteenth century, employed the word “antipoetic” in 1840 in reference to the “petty,” “insipid” life of democratic America. Despite the negative connotations of “antipoetic,” the term did not hinder the Frenchman from seeing that there was something in American life that “is full of poetry, and that is the hidden nerve which gives vigor to the frame” (Democracy in America 89).\(^9\) De Tocqueville goes on to predict that “Amongst a democratic people poetry will not be fed with legendary lays or the memorialis of old traditions. The poet will not attempt to people the universe with supernatural beings in whom his readers and his own fancy have ceased to believe” (91). Yet de Tocqueville does worry that the poetry of democratic nations “will be for ever losing itself in the clouds, and that it will range at last to purely imaginary regions. I fear that the productions of democratic poets may often be surcharged with immense and incoherent imagery, and exaggerated descriptions and strange creations; and that the fantastic beings of their
brains may sometimes make us regret the world of reality” (94). Whereas Huidobro was given to “strange creations” (which were not realistic but which, as he said, became or even supplanted reality) and Neruda and de Rokha were inclined toward “exaggerated descriptions,” Parra would, in ridiculing our foibles and hypocrisies, hew close to quotidian life as we know it, which can so often, as Huidobro himself suggests, “make us regret the world of reality.”

Despite the differences in Huidobro and Parra’s antipoetic conceptions, there are many points at which their writings share similar perspectives and somewhat similar forms of utterance.

To study the antipoems of Parra is necessarily to revisit Huidobro and to understand the “Master’s” effect on his “disciple,” as again Parra characterizes their relationship in “Also Sprach Altazor.” As a devoted advocate of Huidobro’s work, Parra yet remains true to his own antipoetic stance, able at times to poke fun at the Master’s antics and self-importance. Above all, Parra values Huidobro’s humorous side, as when the latter states “Hay que resucitar las lenguas / Con sonoras risas” (We must revive the languages / With raucous laughter),” since, as Parra implies in “Also Sprach Altazor,” Huidobro and he agree that “Es un error muy grande / Tomar el mundo en serio / La verdadera seriedad es cómica” (It is a very great error / To take the world seriously / True seriousness is comic). In creating his own original mode of antipoetry, Parra mostly departs from Huidobro’s type of inverted nature, his rearranged words and images (“Rotundo como el unipacio y el espaĉverso” [Round as the unimos and the cosverse]), with Parra more often depicting the actual absurdities of everyday life that he sees or overhears:

Tumbas que parecéis fuentes de soda [. . .]
Dícese que el cadáver es sagrado,
Pero todos se burlan de los muertos.
¡Con qué objeto los ponen en hileras
Como si fueran latas de sardinas!

(Tombs that look like soda fountains [. . .]
They say the corpse is sacred
But they all make fun of the dead.
Why do they lay them in rows
As if they were sardines?)

Nonetheless, Parra makes it clear in the first section of “Also Sprach Altazor” that without Huidobro, Chilean poetry would have been reduced to the sonnets and odes of Neruda and the moans and groans of de Rokha, nothing to compare with Huidobro’s inversion of objective reality, as in his “Un caballo que se va agrandando a medida que se aleja” (A horse that moves off growing larger as it goes). As a professionally trained physicist
who nevertheless delights in paradox, Parra naturally finds Huidobro’s antiscientific image far more attractive than any imitation of the natural order of things; indeed, Parra alludes to Huidobro’s image when he writes in section fifty-eight of “Also Sprach Altazor”: “Recuerda a ese caballo / Que se agranda a medida que se aleja” (Remember that horse / That grows larger as it moves away).  

In an interview in 1938, Huidobro proclaimed that “Modern poetry begins with me” (Guss x). By 1962, in Parra’s Versos de salón (Salon Verses), he would link Huidobro’s claim with his own declaration that “La poesía terminó conmigo” (Poetry ended with me). If Huidobro was capable of playfulness, as in Altazor, where he has the rivers and jungles ask him “What’s new? how are you?” Parra could remark ironically in “Letters from a Poet Who Sleeps in a Chair” that “Reading my poems makes me drowsy / And yet they were written in blood.” In “Homenaje a Huidobro” (Homage to Huidobro), Parra indirectly “answers” another instance of his predecessor’s sense of humor, as expressed in Huidobro’s Preface to Altazor: “Los cuatro puntos cardinales son tres: el Sur y el Norte” (The four cardinal points are three: South and North) (Huidobro 2003: 4–5). Parra’s version of Huidobro’s witty assertion is that “Los cuatro grandes poetas de Chile / Son tres” (The four great poets of Chile / Are three), and, as with Huidobro’s cardinal points, Parra only lists two poets: Rubén Darío, the Nicaraguan who briefly lived in Chile, where in 1888 he published Azul, his first book and the principal work of Spanish modernismo; and Alonso de Ercilla, who was born in Spain but came to Chile as a conquistador.

In seeing himself as a little God and the first poet of his age, Huidobro could be earnest about his role as a Creationist, whereas Parra, for his part, enjoys puncturing any inflated notion of the poet as an Olympian figure, as when he asks in “Autorretrato” (Self-Portrait),

¿Qué os parece mi cara de abofeteada?
¡Verdad que inspira lástima mirarme! . . .
Observad estas manos
Y estas mejillas blancas de cadáver,
Estos escasos pelos que me quedan.
¡Estas negras arrugas infernales!
Sin embargo yo fui tal como ustedes,
Joven, lleno de bellos ideales. (1966: 10–11)

(What do you think of my clobbered face?
Doesn’t it make you sick to look at me? [. . .]
Observe these hands
And these cheeks white as death,
These few hairs I have left.
These infernal black wrinkles!)
All the same, I was very much like you,
Young, full of pretty ideals.)

Parra is alluding to Huidobro, it would seem, when he asserts that “Los poetas bajaron del Olimpo” (The poets came down from Olympus), and that rather than poets, “los gusanos son dioses” (worms are gods). For Parra, the poet, as he maintains in “Manifiesto,” is not an alchemist (or a magician) but a man like any other, a carpenter who constructs walls, doors, and windows, and the poet’s job “Consiste en superar la página en blanco / Dudo que eso sea posible” (Parra 2006: 143) (is / To improve on the blank page / I don’t think that’s possible). Parra never sounds so optimistic as Huidobro, for instead of creating his own world and a new language (as Huidobro does in Canto VII of Altazor), Parra seeks to reform the present creation by pointing out our illusions and indiscretions and doing so in colloquial speech, calling, as he would say, a spade a spade.

Throughout “Also Sprach Altazor,” Parra discloses that he has closely read the Master’s works and shows that he knows both his life story and its legendary or mythical elements. Parra is familiar not only with the real Huidobro but his fictional personalities, as demonstrated in section two of Parra’s antipoem-speech: “En particular ese naufragio / Que nos sonríe desde su paracaídas” (In particular that shipwrecked one / Who smiles at us from his parachute). While Parra’s “Also Sprach Altazor” is intended as an appreciation of Huidobro and his career, it begins with a subtitle which, according to Parra, is in English, even though he only gives us the Spanish: “Hay que cagar en Huidobro” (Parra 2006: 106; 2009: 173) (We have to crap on Huidobro). Certainly Parra finds many opportunities in his eulogy to parody his celebrated subject, as in section two where he compares Huidobro to the most famous figure in Chilean aeronautical history, Lieutenant Bello, who was lost in a fog and neither he nor his plane was ever located. The notion that Huidobro did not really know where he was going and had lost his way lies perhaps just below the surface of Parra’s homage. In section four, Parra first offers a list of some of Huidobro’s outstanding qualities or accomplishments, such as husband, confidant, abductor, antibridegroom, sharp dresser, the best cook on the planet, champion of the 100 meter dash, the first metaphysician of the Mapocho, and he who shut up Pablo de Rokha (“Hazaña mayor imposible” (Parra 2006: 110; 2009: 177) [Quite an impossible feat]), but then he mentions once again “El aviador extraviado en la niebla” (The pilot lost in the fog).

True to Parra’s antipoetic procedure of ever seeing both sides of any issue—whether social, political, religious, philosophical, or literary—he tends to give with one hand and take away with the other. In section three of “Also Sprach Altazor,” Parra confesses that as a poet he has learned practically everything from Huidobro, including a few bad habits (Parra 2006: 109; 2009: 175). One habit that Parra apparently picked up from
Huidobro is writing about coffins. In Huidobro’s *Vientos contrarios* of 1926, he remarked of coffins that they “debieran tener remos: como que son las barcas del Leteo” (Huidobro 1957: 342) (ought to be fitted out with oars: since they are the boats of Lethe). Among Parra’s countless “artefactos” (artifacts)—found objects that have been slightly altered, placed in a contradictory context, and/or captioned with a telling antipoem—is a black wooden coffin to which Parra attached a propeller. In a review of the 2001 exhibit that included an “artefacto” coffin, which rests on a gurney, and another standing upright, Juan Antonio Ramírez observes of the latter that it was opened to reveal a steering wheel, with the inscription reading: “En caso de resurrección haga girar la tapa del ataúd en sentido contrario a los punteros del reloj. Éste es un ataúd automática” (In case of resurrection turn the coffin lid counterclockwise. This is an automatic coffin). If Parra took the idea for his coffin “artefactos” from Huidobro’s image of coffins with oars, he certainly expanded on his Master’s creation, for Parra has written a number of antipoems on coffins, all of which he presents from a variety of perspectives, including, in “Memorias de un ataúd” (Memories of a Coffin), from the point of view of the coffin itself. In something of a Huidobrian image, the coffin in “Memorias de un ataúd” describes how it was thrown on an apparatus with wheels and

impulsado por un motor a bencina
que salió disparado por la ciudad
experiencia que no olvidaré jamás
puesto que de una plumada
mi vida cambió en 180°
pasé de la inmovilidad absoluta
a un estado de movimiento perpetuo
hasta que llegamos a una casa particular
donde fui depositado sobre una mesa de comedor. (1985: 118–19)

(rocketed through the city
propelled by a gas engine
an experience I will never forget
for all at once
my life took a 180° turn
I went from complete inertia
to a state of perpetual motion
until we arrived at a private house
where I was laid on a dining room table.)

In section six of “Also Sprach Altazor,” entitled “Comillas” (In Quotes), Parra allows Huidobro to speak for himself. Among the statements that “Huidobro” makes are the following:
Talento poético nulo
Mi único mérito consiste
En saber reconocer mis errores
En algo sí que soy intransigente:
La poesía contemporánea comienza conmigo. (2006: 112; 2009: 181)

(Poetic talent null & void
My only merit consists
In knowing how to recognize my own mistakes
On one score I am uncompromising:
Contemporary poetry begins with me.)

Huidobro also informs us that he has published many poems in Chilean and foreign magazines, always to the complete satisfaction of reader friends and the most demanding critics, and concludes that the truth must be told. Entitled “¿Loco? No sé de qué se escandalizan tanto” (Loco? I Don’t Know What’s So Shocking), section seven argues that it is better to be crazy than sane, since wise, sensible men only make our lives miserable with their wars, idyls, and equations. Parra concludes this section by blessing Huidobro, referring to him as his Holiness for having been a thousand times off his rocker, and exclaiming “¡qué professor o padre de la patria” (2006: 113; 2009: 183) (what a teacher or founding father!). In section eight, Parra reports that Huidobro once corrected a line in Homer, changing “Las nubes se alejan como un rebaño de ovejas” (The clouds move off like a flock of sheep) to simply “Las nubes se alejan balando” (The clouds move off bleating). Parra ends this section by saying that it seems Huidobro was right to “improve” on Homer, a conclusion that leaves the reader suspecting that the speaker may have his tongue in his cheek, whereas the praise in section seven made sense and seemed well deserved. With Parra the combination of rendering honor to and sending up his Master is typical of the disciple’s own form of antipoetry that aims at paying dues yet telling the truth, more so it may be than Huidobro was doing when he reported on his friends’ and critics’ response to his published works.

Section nine of “Also Sprach Altazor” lists Huidobro in first place in any contest, with second place vacant and third filled by poet Braulio Apenas. Parra has punningly changed the real surname of Braulio Arenas to “Apenas,” since in Spanish the word means “barely” or “hardly,” implying that Braulio just managed to come in third to Huidobro. For Parra, it seems, neither Neruda nor de Rokha is in the running for Chile’s greatest poet; certainly he does not rank them among the top three. But Parra once again undercuts his praise for Huidobro when he characterizes “Altazor,” the title of section ten, as a poem that “empieza varias veces / Y no termina nunca de empezar” (begins several times / And never stops starting). Parra then recalls

In section twelve, Parra appears to approve of the fact that Huidobro never stuck to one position, with his example coming from Huidobro’s politics. After the Master had written a poem in honor of Lenin, he then turned around one-hundred-eighty degrees when he realized that things were not going well in the communist direction, an about-face that Parra says proves Huidobro’s lucidity and presence of mind. This is followed in section thirteen by Parra’s judgments that anyone who has studied the world cannot help but become a communist, that anyone who has studied Communism cannot help but become an anarchist, that anyone who is not an idealist at twenty has no heart, but anyone who is an idealist at forty does not have a brain. All of this suggests that Huidobro was a winner because he did not hesitate to change his mind, and that at the proper times in his life he had a heart or a head on his shoulders.

With section twenty, Parra announces that Huidobro promoted an international anti-Neruda operation, but Parra says that he is going to come down on top of Huidobro with all his might, “Que es muy grande” (2006: 126; 2009: 209) (Which is very great). But then, in section twenty-one, as will be expected by now, Parra himself does an about-face and lampoons Neruda, by developing a boxing metaphor as a way of implying that the latter did not know how to fight cleanly. This leads in section twenty-three to Parra’s allusion to a book by Faride Zerán, entitled La guerrilla literaria: Huidobro, de Rokha, Neruda (1992), in which the author traces the literary war engaged in by these three Chilean rivals. Parra’s apparent position is that Huidobro got the best of both his challengers. As the poem has it, Huidobro whipped his opponents, on one occasion, by virtue of a clever comeback to the pair’s accusation that he descended from a slave trader. Huidobro replied that he preferred such a heritage to being, like Neruda and de Rokha, the offspring of his grandfather’s slaves. Neruda once attacked Huidobro by declaring in public that he did not see how an aristocrat could write poetry, to which Huidobro responded in kind that he did not see why in order to write poetry one had to be the son of a railway worker, a dig at the occupation of Neruda’s dad. In terms of whose background was more proper for being a poet, Parra has Huidobro state in section twenty-seven, entitled “Pseudonym,” that he has nothing to hide in his bloodline, that he has never changed his name (as both Neruda and de Rokha did), and that furthermore he is a direct descendant of the epic hero El Cid, the subject of Huidobro’s poetic novel, Mío Cid Campeador (1929). In section twenty-nine, Huidobro delivers another uppercut to Neruda’s pugilistic jaw in response to the latter’s charge that Huidobro’s poetry is too cerebral. Huidobro battles
back that he does not write with his feet, and rather than writing for maids, as Neruda does, he composes his poetry for princes.

Parra next takes up the issue of the various literary movements or tendencies popular during Huidobro’s day. In section thirty, Huidobro, the “Poète français / Né au Chili” (French poet / Born in Chile), as he will be called in section thirty-two, is speaking with Mother Nature, informing her that he is not a Dadaist, Surrealist, Futurist, NewWorldist, masochist or social realist, but “Creacionista mujer x Dios / El poeta es un pequeño Dios / Un pequeño demonio / ce’est la même chose” (2006: 138, 136; 2009: 233, 229) (By god woman a Creationist / The poet’s a little God / A little devil / it’s the same thing). Huidobro goes on to explain that he has nothing against Mother Nature but he wants to create his own rivers, trees, and volcanoes, just as she gave birth to hers. In all this, of course, Parra is summarizing Huidobro’s Creationist theories, but doing so after his own comedic, antipoetic manner. In sections thirty-four and thirty-six, Parra once again summarizes, with tongue in cheek, Huidobro’s Creationist practice, which includes saying goodbye to the remote past, mimesis, and negative capability, renouncing rhyme and meter, replacing the photographic camera with the kaleidoscope, having cows climb on rainbows, and printing poems on toilet paper.24 To this Parra responds, in section thirty-six, with sensational, ingenious, and elefantastic, only to conclude with “Pero no nos vengan con que eso es poesía” (2006: 142; 2009: 241) (But don’t come around telling us that that is poetry).

In section thirty-seven, Parra defines poetry as whatever unites us, whereas only prose can keep us apart. Poetry, he says, is founded on the word, but ultimately you yourself are poetry, or, as in the section’s last line, you yourself are antipoetry (an allusion to poem XXI of Spanish poet Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer’s Rimas). In section thirty-eight, entitled “Para complicar otro poco las cosas” (To Complicate Matters a Little More), Parra suggests that Huidobro was not so entirely revolutionary in his view of poetry as he had claimed. Parra then reveals that Huidobro was a sincere admirer of modernists of the second order, and that he passionately advanced a lesser figure like Pedro Antonio González as THE poet of Chile, as if such outstanding poets as Manuel Magallanes (1878–1924) and Carlos Pezoa Véliz (1879–1908) had never existed.

In section forty-three, Parra returns to the literary war between Huidobro and his rivals Neruda and Pablo de Rokha, which Parra intimates the latter of these had lost before the conflict even began, since de Rokha did not know what he was getting into by tangling with the champ. In almost every section of Parra’s tribute to Huidobro, he defends him from his critics’ attacks and takes his side against his greatest literary enemies, Neruda and de Rokha. Yet now Parra finds that none of the Big Three lived up to his words; Parra’s example is the trio’s declaration of love for Rimbaud. Parra
contends that the three Chileans failed to back up unconditionally their professions of love, since none of them amputated his leg and none of them quit writing at age twenty. Parra ends the section by confessing that he has just started reading at the age of eighty.

In section fifty, Parra considers the divided opinions as to who is the greatest poet of the New World. Some, he says, place the author of Altazor above all others, whereas some rate either Pound, Whitman, Vallejo, or Drummond de Andrade number one, not to mention the Nerudians, who were always the most powerful in promoting their own contestant as the greatest: “El oro de Moscú pues” (2009: 269) (The Moscow gold, don’t you know). As for the modernism practiced by most of the candidates, Parra concludes that it is still in fashion, even though it is no longer a valid method for thinking about the contemporary world. The implication seems to be that only Parra’s own antipoetic methodology remains an effective model, and yet, in section fifty-one, he declares that on nearing the third millennium, it is clear that with years time has favored Huidobro, who will forgive us all for ever having doubted that his work would endure.

One of several reasons that Parra gives for Huidobro’s centrality is his ecological dimension, which Parra evokes in section fifty-five. Ecology is dear to Parra himself, and so it is not surprising that he calls for a re-reading of Huidobro’s “versículos” (his Bible-like “verses”) in Altazor. The particular lines to which Parra refers, without quoting them himself, appear in Canto I, and concern Huidobro’s prophetic vision of technology laying waste the planet (“Y las máquinas mataron el último animal” (And the machines killed the last animal) and of man being reduced by overpopulation to an ant, a mere number (“En donde el hombre-hormiga será una cifra” (2003: 38–41) (Where ant-man will be a cipher). In Huidobro’s vision of future cities, mankind, in order to survive, will have to plant gardens of tomatoes and cabbage, instead of flowers, and to set out fruit trees along all the roads and in all the public parks. With irony Huidobro sighs, “Ah la hermosa vida que preparan las fábricas” (2003: 40–41) (Oh the beautiful life the factories create). In section fifty-six, Parra continues his ecological theme by declaring, as he does in a number of his other works, that our mistake has been in thinking that we own the earth, when we only belong to it. In addition to serving as a precursor in terms of antipoetic theory and practice, Huidobro also preceded Parra by predicting the ecological tragedy that Parra himself has for years warned against. Huidobro had already foreseen the coming of the catastrophic death of species and of the polluting of our air, for which Parra honors him, to Parra’s own credit.

The idea that Huidobro should be re-read follows not only from ecological considerations but simply from the fact that, as Parra affirms in section eighty, Huidobro is a required author for every young poet and every
reader worth his salt. In section eighty-two, Parra declares that Huidobro laid the first and last stone of the edifice designated as the New Chilean Poetry, and this was, he emphasizes, before Neftalí Reyes changed his name (to Pablo Neruda). As Parra puts it, Huidobro came down from his ivory tower and said no to “toda forma de tontalitarismo” (2006: 191; 2009: 337) (every form of totalitaridiocy). And yet with all this, as Parra had indignantly noted in section fifty-eight, a reader cannot even find a Complete Works of Huidobro, for there exists no cheap or luxury edition. Parra addresses the President of the Chilean Society of Writers and asks him to explain such an anomaly. Parra goes on to say that Huidobro was denied the National Prize under the pretext that he was dead, which causes Parra to exclaim: “Ojalá los amigos sepultureros / Estuvieran tan vivos como él” (2006: 165; 2009: 285) (Would that his gravedigging friends / Were as alive as he). Parra further vents his ironic rage by reminding his reader that Huidobro never received the National, Nobel, and not even the Municipal prize, “Y todavía hay gente que cree en los premios!” (2006: 166; 2009: 287) (And there are still people who believe in prizes!).

In his tribute to Huidobro, Parra makes it clear that he prefers the Creationist to any other contender to the title of Chile’s greatest poet. In section seventy-nine, Parra offers his personal opinion that Huidobro is one of the very few poets whose work one can read straight through, whereas the writing of most poets has to be read from back to front, otherwise nothing much comes of it. Parra had begun to conclude his “Also Sprach Altazor” by revealing in section sixty-three that from his home in Las Cruces, across the bay from Cartagena, he could see Huidobro’s tomb. In section seventy-one Parra alludes to Chilean writer Enrique Lafourcade, who had hinted that Huidobro died in Cartagena from a heart attack because he was too cheap to pay for a taxi to drive him to the top of the hill, with all his bags and wearing a dark suit in the middle of summer. Previously, in section sixty-two, Parra had ticked off the ages at which the great Chilean poets had died: Huidobro at 55; Enrique Lihn at 58; Gabriela Mistral at 68; Neruda at 69. The moral is, Parra says, “Los inmortales no llegan a los 70” (2006: 170; 2009: 295) (Immortals don’t make it to 70). Unlike these more humorous sections, section sixty-three memorializes Huidobro as a truly vital spirit, since Parra states that from morning to night he can perceive “Las señales eléctricas del poeta / Amanece y se pone con el sol” (2006: 171; 2009: 297) (The poet’s electric signals / He rises and sets with the sun). Here it may be that Parra is playing upon a line in Canto I of Huidobro’s Altazor: “El sol nace en mi ojo derecho y se pone en mi ojo izquierdo” (2003: 34–35) (The sun rises in my right eye and sets in my left), but the ultimate and unequivocal tribute to Huidobro comes in the final section of “Also Sprach Altazor,” number eighty-four, in which Parra quotes the opening lines of Huidobro’s
“Monumento al mar” (Monument to the Sea), one of the poet’s last great poems.

With only one small change to the original text of “Monumento al mar,” Parra closes his own poem with Huidobro’s lines that call for

Paz sobre la constelación cantante de las aguas
[. . .]
Paz sobre la lápida de los naufragios
Paz sobre los tambores del orgullo y las pupilas tenebrosas
Y si yo soy el traiductor de las olas

(Peace above the singing constellation of waters
[. . .]
Peace above the tombstones of the shipwrecked
Peace above the drums of pride and the dark pupils of the eye
And if I’m the translator of waves
Peace too above me.)

By merely altering Huidobro’s “tradicutor” (translator) to read “traiductor,” Parra ends with one of his frequent bits of word play, a combination of “traitor” and “translator,” not letting us forget, perhaps, that he is more the antipoet than even his admired and honored mentor (Discursos de sobremesa 193). And yet, how many times in Altazor has Huidobro rearranged such words as horizon and mountain into “horitaña” and “montazonte” or violoncello and swallow into “violondrina” and “goloncelo” (2003: 88–89).

In “Also Sprach Altazor,” Nicanor Parra has saluted Vicente Huidobro as the type of a Nietzsche who overturned the traditional world of poetry through his experimental and still innovative conceptions. Although Parra can satirize his fellow antipoet, he has clearly read Huidobro with an eye to his antipoetic lessons and has found in specific passages of his Altazor and its Preface, as well as in other of his poems and prose, the kinds of wit, intelligence, and daring that greatly appeal to Parra’s own sense of the poet as an audacious thinker and adventurous verbal artist. Parra’s affinity for Huidobro’s program of a new antipoetic order is obviously based on the former’s having chosen an approach to the New World poem different from Neruda’s more often morose and humorless catalogs of flora and fauna and his rather romantically effusive litanies of earthly landscapes and human love. In “Also Sprach Altazor,” through paying homage to Huidobro’s precedence as a playful, ironic, and iconoclastic antipoet, Parra returns to the roots of his own irreverent, intentionally irritating, and ingenious writing, which owes much to his Master’s having laid the first, if not the last, stone of Chile’s antipoetic line, a lineage that now spans two centuries and continues to garner readers around the globe.
Notes

1. In the book-burning scene in Chapter 6, Ercilla’s epic poem appears in the following speech: “—‘Todos esos tres libros’ [La Araucana, La Austriada, El Monserrate]—dijo el Cura—‘son los mejores que, en verso heroico, en lengua castellana están escritos, y pueden competir con los más famosos de Italia; guárdense como las más ricas prendas de poesía que tiene España’” (Cervantes 171) (—All three of those books—said the priest—are the best written in Spanish in heroic verse, and can compete with the most famous from Italy; keep them as Spain’s crown jewels of poetry).

2. For “Poeta / Anti poeta,” see Canto I in Vicente Huidobro’s Altazor (2003: 34), and for “antipoeta y mago,” see Canto IV (94). For Huidobro’s all-caps manifesto and his further declarations on the dangers of the poetic, see The Selected Poetry of Vicente Huidobro, ed. David M. Guss (1981: 76). Huidobro’s prose statements are translated into English from his Manifies, a volume written in French (the French not included in The Selected Poetry) and published in Paris in 1925.

3. See Canto III of Altazor in Huidobro (2003: 74–75); The Selected Poetry (Huidobro 1981: 2–3), and Altazor (Huidobro 2003: 68). The complete phrases in Spanish for the quotes or paraphrases from “El espejo de agua” are: “El poeta es un pequeño Dios” and “el adjetivo, cuando no da vida, mata.” The complete line from Altazor is: “Manicura de la lengua es el poeta.”

4. See Huidobro, The Selected Poetry 78: “The poet will no longer imitate nature, for he doesn’t allow himself the right to plagiarize God”; and Altazor, (Huidobro 2003: 114–15, 70–71, and 68–69: “Jugamos fuera del tiempo”; “fuera del mundo cotidiano”; “Y el árbol se posará sobre la tórtala”; “La flor se comerá a la abeja.” The first sentence in English is translated from Manifes, which Antonio de Undurraga considers “el verdadero evangelio de la teoría creacionista” (173) (the true gospel of creationist theory).

5. Nicanor Parra’s view of Huidobro as a self-styled antipoet is complex, even ambiguous. On one occasion, Parra stated that “Fue Vicente Huidobro el que me colgó ese sambenito del antipoemista” (55) (Vicente Huidobro was the one who hung on me that infamous antipoemist tag). This sentence originally appeared in “Nicanor Parra nos habla un poco de sus anticosas,” an interview in El día from 1986; it was later reprinted in a special issue of Santiago’s The Clinic devoted to Parra and his antipoetry. On the other hand, Parra declares in “Antipoeta Vicente Huidobro?” section 61 of his “Also Sprach Altazor,” in Discursos de sobremesa (2006), that the notion that Huidobro was an antipoet is news to him, that he understood that someone else had invented antipoetry, meaning himself. With intentional irony, he concludes section 61 by cautioning the reader against believing Parra and Ignacio Valente, the latter a regular literary critic for Chile’s El Mercurio who from early on and up to the present day has praised antipoetry as Parra’s original contribution to world letters.

6. For the Huidobro claim that he was the only singer of the century, see Altazor (Huidobro 2003: 130–31).

8. See note 5 above.
9. This is the Henry Reeve first English translation of de Tocqueville’s book, which appeared in 1840, the same year as the publication of the original in French.
10. As translated from the French, Huidobro’s pronouncement reads: “The poem, such as it is presented here, is not realistic, but human. It is not realistic, but it becomes reality” (Huidobro 1981: 78).
11. Huidobro’s lines are from Canto III of Altazor (Huidobro 2003: 74–75). Parra’s lines are from section eleven of “Also Sprach Altazor,” in Discursos de sobremesa, 117; the English translation is from After-Dinner Declarations, trans. Dave Oliphant (191).
12. Huidobro’s lines are from Canto IV of Altazor (Huidobro 98–99). Parra’s lines are from his “Discurso fúnebre” (Funeral Address), in Poems and Antipoems, a bilingual edition edited by Miller Williams (104–05).
13. Parra opens “Also Sprach Altazor” by asking in section one “Que sería de Chile sin Huidobro / [...] Desde luego no habría libertad de expresión / Todos estaríamos escribiendo Sonetos / Odas elementales / O gemidos / Alabado sea el Santísimo!” (Where would Chile be without Huidobro [...] For certain there would be no freedom of expression / We would all be writing Sonnets / Elemental Odes / Or moans / Blessed be the Most Holy!). The Huidobro line appears in Altazor (Huidobro 2003: 92); Parra’s lines are from his Discursos de sobremesa (107); English translation from After-Dinner Declarations (171).
14. Parra studied physics both at Brown and Oxford universities (or was supposed to at the latter but on discovering Shakespeare he devoted himself to the Bard’s poetry) and taught physics at the University of Chile.
15. “La poesía terminó conmigo” is also included in Parra’s Poems and Antipoems (86–87), and in Antipoems: New and Selected (42–45).
17. The Parra statement is one of his “artefactos” (artifacts) on display for a celebration of the poet (since the thrust of the argument discusses both poets in the context of antipoetry) and his work, held in Santiago in August 2001. The proceedings from the celebration, entitled Ciclo Homenaje en torno a la figura y obra de Nicanor Parra: Coloquio Internacional de escritores y académicos, were published in 2002 by the Chilean Ministry of Education, and a catalog of the exhibit of Parra’s “artefactos” was issued as Obras públicas (2006), n.p. Parra’s “Homenaje a Huidobro” is not included in the catalog, but it is quoted in Roberto Bolaño’s article, “El exilio y la literatura: Discursos en Viena.”
19. The subtitle of Altazor is o El viaje en paracaídas (or The Parachute Voyage). There are a number of shipwrecks mentioned in the poem, as in the line “Y caí de naufragio en naufragio de horizonte en horizonte” (And I fell from shipwreck into shipwreck horizon to horizon), to which Parra may be alluding. Parra may also be thinking of the line “Colgado al paracaídas de sus propios prejucicios” (Hanging in the parachute of his own prejudices). For the Huidobro lines, see Altazor (Huidobro 2003: 102–103, and 20–21). For Parra’s lines, see Discursos de sobremesa (108); After-Dinner Declarations (173).
20. For the history of Teniente (Lieutenant) Bello, see Francisco Mouat’s Chilenos de raza (103–129). On page 124, Mouat reports that Lieutenant Bello was lost along
the route between Culitrín and Cartagena, the latter, as Parra well knew, the home of
Huidobro at the end of his life and now his burial site, which features a mural, including an image of the mill that turns out words, images, and emotional states in Canto V of Altazor, and an inscription bearing a variation of the following line, also from Canto V: “Se abre la tumba y al fondo se ve el mar” (The tomb opens and in its depths we see the sea). See Altazor (Huidobro 2003: 108–09). To view the tomb and mural, see the following blog: caltobris.blogspot.com/2007/10/tumbas.html. Parra refers to Huidobro’s tomb in section sixty-three of “Also Sprach Altazor,” which will be discussed in a subsequent paragraph.

21. Parra’s “prepared” coffin (a la John Cage) is reproduced in his Obras públicas (n.p).
22. Juan Antonio Ramírez’s original review appeared in Diario El País for May 12, 2001, and is reprinted as something of a foreword to Parra’s Obras públicas.
23. A third facsimile edition of the work was issued in 1995 by Chile’s Editorial Universitaria. In an asterisked note to a letter Huidobro wrote to actor Douglas Fairbanks, he traces his line on the maternal side from Alfonso X el Sabio, “que como todos saben era tataranieto del Cid” (who as all know was the great-great-grandson of the Cid), to his grandfather, Domingo Fernández Concha. Huidobro goes on to comment that “Me sentí nieto del Cid, me vi sentado en sus rodillas y acariciando esa noble barba tan crecida que nadie se atrevió a tocar jamás. Si mi abuelo era o no descendiente de reyes no lo sé ni me importa. Lo que sí puedo afirmar es que nunca he encontrado un hombre con más porte y ademanes de rey que él” (I felt myself the grandson of the Cid, I saw myself seated on his knees and stroking that noble beard so long that no one ever dared to touch it. If my grandfather was or was not a descendant of kings I neither know nor does it matter to me. What I can affirm is that never have I found a man with greater bearing and manners of a king than he). See Huidobro, “Carta a Mr. Douglas Fairbanks,” in Mío Cid Campeador (1995); the asterisked note following Huidobro’s letter to Fairbanks is unpaginated.
24. Parra seems to have in mind Keats’s “negative capability” as one of poetry’s modi operandi that Huidobro rejects. However, there is a good deal of evidence in Altazor of Huidobro’s having adopted such a Keatsian mode or poetic frame of mind. Examples appear especially in Canto V: “Y tengo una experiencia de mariposa milenaria” (And I’m having a millennial butterfly experience); “Y he aquí que ahora me diluyo en múltiples cosas / Soy luciérnaga y voy iluminando las ramas de la selva” (And here I must dissolve myself into many things / I’m a firefly lighting the forest branches); “Ahora soy rosal y hablo con lenguaje de rosal” (Now I’m a rosebush speaking rose language); “Y luego soy pájaro / Y me disputo el día en gorjeos” (And then I’m a bird / And I argue all day in chirps). See Altazor (Huidobro 2003: 126–31). For the first and last translations I have preferred those in The Selected Poetry (139 and 143). Other examples of Huidobro’s type of metamorphosis appear in “La Poesía es un atentado celeste” (Poetry Is a Heavenly Crime): “Me estoy haciendo árbol Cuántas veces me he ido convirtiendo en otras cosas [. . .] Es doloroso y lleno de ternura” (I’m turning into a tree How often I’ve turned into other things [. . .] It’s painful and full of tenderness). See The Selected Poetry (210–11).
25. The alteration to “traductor” does not appear in the printed edition of Discursos de sobremesa, but Parra added the “i” to “traductor” in my own copy of his book. He was apparently correcting a “typo” or had decided to make the addition, since “tra(i)ductor” is printed in Discursos in the phrase “Como el tra(i)ductor de Hamlet,” in section eighteen of the antipoem-speech entitled “Discurso del Bío Bío” (215). In my own copy of the book, Parra did not place parentheses around the “i.”
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Intersecting Reflections: Huidobro Through Juan Luís Martínez’s *La nueva novela*

*Oscar D. Sarmiento*

“Were it not by contradiction, contraries would cease, if one dares to say it, to exist, and in addition, to contradict themselves.”
—Monterroso (318)

Juan Luis Martínez’s (1942–1993) brief but significant poetic legacy consists of two books: *La nueva novela* (*The New Novel*) and *Poemas del otro* (*Poems of the Other*). No less than writers like Juan Rulfo and Augusto Monterroso, Martínez was always highly attentive to the quality of the work he published, and for this reason, the only books he published during his lifetime were *La nueva novela* and a peculiar book-object called “La poesía chilena” (*Chilean Poetry*). Interestingly, Raúl Zurita questioned the posthumous publication of *Poemas del otro*, a book that includes poems and interviews, on the grounds that Martínez himself always kept a sharp critical eye on the work he published. According to Zurita, “[Juan Luis Martínez] was so careful, so obsessive about the poem’s structure, about the poet’s absolute control over his materials. [He was] as nobody else I have known.”

Any serious study of the work of Juan Luis Martínez must depart from *La nueva novela* and, in this sense, if one wants to pursue the traces of Vicente Huidobro’s poetic project in Martínez’s writing—that path of interwoven differences—one’s reading must focus on this book and strive to establish the ways in which a set of textual reflections shine through such a disconcerting poetic device. This is what I attempt to accomplish in the pages that follow.

Although *La nueva novela* is the principal point of departure, we might also say that Juan Luis Martínez’s “La poesía chilena” offers interesting access to the reflections we have in mind here. “La poesía chilena” was Martínez’s way of making explicit his debt to those poets who contributed to give Chilean poetry a solid contemporary reputation in the twentieth century. This book-object consists of copies of the death certificates of Gabriela Mistral, Pablo Neruda, Pablo de Rokha and Vicente Huidobro attached to card catalogue entries from the Chilean National Library that refer to the
work of each poet—specifically, to poems that deal with death. It subsequently includes 34 more blank cards interspersed with reproductions of the Chilean flag, in addition to a small bag filled with soil, that, according to Martínez, was taken from the central valley in Chile. The final “entry” in his book-object is a copy of his father’s death certificate.

The inclusion of these key names in Chilean poetry along with other blank cards certainly suggests Martínez’s recognition of a diverse range of people who have made possible the process of creation and recreation of poetic writing in Chile. Furthermore, Martínez’s father’s death certificate establishes a link between genetic and poetic paternity, while Gabriela Mistral’s opens up other latent, certainly matriarchal, possibilities. Through “La poesía chilena,” then, Martínez acknowledges Huidobro as a key antecedent for poetic writing in Chile, but not to the exclusion of other prominent figures such as de Rokha, Neruda, and the imposing Gabriela Mistral.3

This point of access underscores a flow of strands that link diverse poetic practices and support a speculative connection between Martínez and Huidobro through a number of key parallels. In La nueva novela, for example, the productive bond between creativity and intelligence stands out in a way that clearly evokes the importance Huidobro attributed to this bond, precisely in the context of the image of the poet as a medium taken over by subconscious drives. For Martínez, the book is effective when it turns into an object that has been laboriously constructed, and whose architecture stems from the dazzling visual, literary, and conceptual intelligence of the poet.

Huidobro’s insistence on the creationist value of his work, on the other hand, does not revolve around the simple individualistic will of an avant-garde artist, and takes on a collective dimension if one reads it as a claim the poet needs to make in relation to the avant-garde’s European discursive center.4 In addition, Huidobro praises the active value of creationism in the period between world wars, when counteracting a devastating historical impulse was a major task at hand. As Ruben Darío did when presented with the opportunity, here Huidobro asserts that the poet can achieve prominence with the products of his imagination and thus introduce an alternative, unforeseen view shaped by the unbalances of power. The self-sufficient imaginary qua poetic object validates its producer, a Latin American “pequeño Dios” (little God) who aspires to and will contribute to redefine the cultural landscape with his inventive capacity. The avant-garde creator is, then, contemporary and Latin American to boot.

Martínez’s poetic practice, I would argue, strongly continues this plural, legitimating, creationist Latin American impulse. The goal is not simply to produce a ciphered text whose target audience is an intellectual elite at the cutting edge of its cultural, philosophical and political moment, but rather to
set in motion a multifaceted, ultra-cosmopolitan work engaged in the global library—a vision largely embraced by Ezra Pound—that enters the book circulation sphere as a unique and efficient product.

Given their obsession for returning to a few select French authors—Nerval, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud, in particular—one might at first characterize Darío, Huidobro, and Martínez as uncritical peripheral devotees of French literature, especially given their insistence on the importance of these writers for the Latin American poet’s quest to achieve transnational literary stature. If this were so, the escapism Ana Pizarro posits—which follows an orthodox vision of Latin America’s cultural “mestizaje” (hybridity)—would only corroborate this lack of intellectual independence. However, Huidobro’s trajectory could not have attained its exemplary importance without his appreciation for “the new” in French literary magazines, his interest in the French poetry written between world wars, the importance that translating and writing in French attained for him, and his careful attention to what was being written in French at the time. Thus, understanding the path Huidobro followed requires inserting his journey in that renewed tradition of writing, and recognizing his will to carve out a unique poetic space for himself while at the same time legitimating a poetic voice in French. His polemic with Pierre Reverdy, for instance, constitutes an evident effort at cultural legitimation. Placing himself at the level of those who were writing in the “First World” and claiming that the cultural space and prestige associated with it originated at productive crossroads or intersections, Huidobro strove to create a unique voice for himself. Martínez’s intellectual horizon, on the other hand, always included, as La nueva novela demonstrates, key poetic, critical, and philosophical works produced in France as reference points used to orient his poetry. In addition, Martínez broadened the range of the artists’ work with which his poetry entered in dialogue by, for example, quoting and referencing works by conceptual artists from the United States such as Yoko Ono and Denis Oppenheimer.

To mention this characterization of cultural dependency on works produced in France is important not because it necessarily uncovers, as Enrique Lihn would brilliantly argue, the peripheral poet’s unbearably exasperating lack in situ with respect to an alluring and multifaceted cultural center, but because it reveals a productive source of unique alternatives for creative production. If creation starts at a crossroads, the poet needs to avail himself of a nurturing source embedded in a major cultural legacy so as to bring to the forefront a relevant, alternative, diverse writing project. For this reason, and because he prefers to stress the interweaving of voices his own voice refracts, instead of silencing the library he consults, Martínez displays this tendency from the very beginning of the book by dedicating it to Roger Caillois (1913–1978), a writer who played an important role in the
recognition of Latin American literature in French. The book’s dedication, I would argue, is a key moment in this explicit connection, because traditionally a writer dedicates his book to friends and so his or her dedication sends the readers outside of the book, to the empirical life of that writing subject. But in this case Martínez’s relationship to the French writer is only of an intellectual nature and so the dedication functions both as a gesture of deference toward Caillois and also as a way to legitimate the Chilean’s writing project as well as the intricate textuality of his book from the start. If, facing up to formidable linguistic and cultural challenges, Huidobro persisted in writing and publishing, thus reaffirming the possibility of developing his own unique voice as an emerging Latin American writer, Martínez, who always endured precarious economic circumstances and could not count on any major institutional support, accomplished no less. The quotations and references to Caillois, Mallarmé, Blanchot, or Deleuze in Martínez’s work engage the voice of the poet in conversation with these authors, and the dialogue that then ensues occurs because of—and against—the obvious differences. This conversation stems, then, from the poet’s desire to inscribe his work in a legacy of arresting revelations when not in that “tradición de la ruptura” (tradition of rupture) described by Octavio Paz in the context of twentieth-century avant-garde movements. In Huidobro’s, as well as in Martínez’s work, one appreciates a reverence for the uncanny streak that runs against the grain of a trivial conception of reality, and submerges the reader in the puzzling workings of paradoxes.

Juan Luís Martínez fashioned La nueva novela as a micro-universe in endless flux shaped by a centripetal movement, through which other texts are pulled into the vortex of the book, and also via a centrifugal movement, through which other intertextual knots unravel and spring to life from the central vortices of the book. The very title of his book invites the reader to confront in jest a work that does not conform to a narrative reconfiguration of the novel, much in the way that authors such as Julio Cortázar, whose great sense of humor and playfulness attracted many readers, endeavored to realize. Martínez’s book title is so dry, so conceptual, that if a reader were to relate it to Altazor, the major book-poem by Huidobro, he or she would be at pains to do so. And, yet, Huidobro’s title encapsulates fundamental traits of La nueva novela: it is a cipher to be decoded, it stems from a play on words, and humor is the glue that produces the alchemy of the word combination. Furthermore, no less than Martínez’s, at its core Huidobro’s poetic machine springs forth from a persistent weaving of language games. The title of Huidobro’s book acquaints the reader with a hero, a mythical male entity and his tragedy, one that springs to life through language games which both construct and deconstruct him as he falls through space from the start to the end of the poem’s seven cantos. On the cover of La nueva novela, to counter the hyperbolic affirmation of the title, Martínez introduces both the author’s
name and another possible name under erasure (crossed-out), and he also includes the picture of a number of houses unhinged from their base. If one may not, as Gwen Kirkpatrick observes, simply dismiss the intervention of an authoritarian voice eager to impose his reading protocols on the unsuspecting reader of the book, Martínez, who is keenly aware of this voice, not only advances the name of the author through this deconstruction, but also proposes a universe in which the house as a core familiar symbolic space has been decentered, altered, and uprooted. Other than the essential role that fantastic and humoristic imaginary creatures (such as Lewis Carroll’s Cheshire cat or Christian Morgenstern’s “Nasobema lyricum”) play in paralleling the clever poetic project of the avant-garde, only the book itself matches the ultra-modern, enterprising poetic displayed by Altazor’s accelerated, free-falling game of language disruptions. This is so because La nueva novela, in its productive alterity, underscores its hesitations through a ceaseless suspension of its possible assertive formulations, and also demands that “reading,” as construct, brilliantly unfolds as a model that in fact deconstructs itself.

In truth Martínez’s title echoes Huidobro’s in a more precise and at the same time relevant way. La nueva novela invites us to reflect not only on our conception of the author but also on our conception of the book itself and the texts it includes. In this case Duchamp’s ready-made—his famous urinal being a glaring example—can help us to think through the inclusion of the book in a system that frames it as a product for public consumption, one that must follow a set of established rules and thus conform to the strictures of such a normalizing, regulating procedure. Keenly aware of the cultural and literary system of expectations that frames the book of poetry, Martínez gave shape to his book title through a lucid and playful move that recalls Huidobro’s, and that stresses the operations that pressure the text to make it (purportedly) comply with a given normative identity. Martínez wanted to preserve the book’s magic, its hesitations, its antithetical character (anti-poetry, anti-poem, anti-poet), all the moves through which the book anticipates the system of rules and codifications as well as commercial and publishing circulations.

Referring to the historical sources of avant-garde movements, Octavio Paz argues, “Its historical origins are outside the Classical tradition of the West: black art, pre-Colombian art, the art of Oceania” (144). If the avant-garde worked hard at displacing the location of the art object by making it consonant with the alterity of peripheral cultural products, Martínez, whose work originates from the cultural location of the South American artist in the seventies, recognized himself in this effort. After the wild magician’s puzzle that Huidobro set in motion, the new savage’s word would emerge from a critical gap that reshaped the poet’s identity and which the poet as a Latin
American writer embraced, all the while placing that identity under erasure and opening it up to multiple possibilities.

Martínez’s book constitutes a cipher or conundrum that displays and deconstructs its own assertions from the start. If the reader wants to play the game its reading entails, he or she needs to consider that both the blank page (in its sheer whiteness) and its corresponding negative facet (a most absolute opacity) trigger such a game. The pleasure of the text, to reference here the Barthesian formula, originates from the reader’s engagement with the paradox that asserts the musical importance of the “pajarístico” (bird-like language) or poetic language while at the same time recognizing the utter silence that grounds it. La nueva novela organizes itself, then, as a clever device that not only seeks an informed, intelligent reader, but which strives to produce its own reader. The book does so both by requiring the reader to consider the nuanced disposition of its shifting pieces and by requiring that he or she visit that explicit library the book remarkably inhabits. Similarly, Huidobro’s cubist project not only privileged an intelligent crafting of the self-referential metaphorical shifts taking place within the poem, but also demanded of the reader the pleasurable experience of reconstructing such shifts—shifts belonging to an imaginary universe thought to be utterly chaotic, and therefore at odds with the representational artistic mold of the period. The poems from Horizon Carré, Ecuatorial or Poemas Árticos, not to mention those of Altazor, compel the early twentieth-century reader to go beyond the representational poetics of the period and engage in the game of the poetic puzzle as a disconcerting device in constant re-composition. Linking his or her own creative intelligence to the inventive intelligence of the book, the reader comes to postulate a symmetry between the rediscovery of such complicity and an unstoppable, unrelenting imagination. Thus reader and writer become, as poet Enrique Lihn writes, “escrilectores” (writereaders).

Another parallel between the writing of Martínez and Huidobro stems from the relevant role that the visual component takes on for the creative intelligence of the poet. Furthermore, in rethinking the book object, Martínez highlights the cultural role it plays as a visual art commodity, thereby underscoring its ready-made character. The movement between visual arts and literature, so significant for Huidobro, achieves a critical edge in Martínez. The reason is apparent: to the extent that this intersection takes place according to a calibrated strategy, it is possible to decenter the book object as much as the individual texts it includes. In a culture saturated by images on display, where literature appears increasingly inserted within the scope of visual territories and not vice versa, Martínez offers that intersection as a starting point for further reflection and creative developments. One finds in Martínez a number of characteristics that Huidobro not only sensed, but actually elaborated, especially the relevance
he assigned to the layout of the text over the blank page, the expressive
capacity of typography, the artistic value of blank space, the material quality
of the paper and its color, and the compelling visual effect of the calligram
and the painted poem. To present the reader with a visual universe that
broke free from the representational mold, Huidobro endeavored to develop
a unique visual landscape—his poetic practice stemming from the
intersection between the poetic and the visual—that went hand in hand with
his crafting of a dazzling poetic game. This explains why collage became
for Huidobro, as was the case for many other early twentieth-century artists,
the quintessential tool to assert the relevance of multifaceted texts and
books. In *Ecuatorial*, for instance, a number of elements that shift places and
recombine in poem after poem compel the reader to recollect other poems
featuring the same elements in different contexts, as if the book were but the
art of weaving an unending, obsessive combinatics of elements. Thus while
the poem takes place in an ever-expanding universe whose centripetal force
seems to originate in the hallucinatory-combinatory art of a collage, the
reader navigates as a hyperactive and paradoxically lost subject. In other
words, the deep, ultimate meaning of the poem evaporates; it flees the
reading trajectory, and what is set in motion now, as a magic that never loses
sight of its wit, is the central epistemological significance that this frontal
attack on depth and meaning attains for modernity. *La nueva novela* takes up
these preoccupations and, thus, it works as a visual-textual device whose
axis shifts positions so that the book includes itself in the horizon of the
visual arts without excluding itself from the literary space. The fabric of the
book presents itself then under the guise of a set of questions or unsolved
problems, and also reveals itself according to a conceptual reframing
informed by the operations that trivialize and commodify the circulation of
books. By so dislodging the book object from the circulation system that
constrains it, *La nueva novela* claims its own place in the legacy of artistic
disruptions enacted by the (neo)avant-garde. And even if this is due to
several causes, the very limited edition of the book suggests that it
effectively insists on its presence as a dissonant object, as an enemy of
serial, massive production and thus understands itself as a cult object, a
fetish of critical resistances. The very fabric of the book object acquires
qualitative significance when the status quo strives to mold it into an elitist
product, thus keeping the strength of its unique, persistent, and impertinent
force at bay.

The visual component—photography and drawing, for instance—in *La
nueva novela* is an integral part of the book object. This is also a
multifaceted way of advancing the opening of the game for those who read
and reread it, since the book, by stressing the repetition of its features, points
out to the reader that he or she needs to go back or jump ahead within the
infinite game of self-references. To appreciate the playful zest of *La nueva
novela we need to make use of our tools of visual analysis as much as of our literary library because they are tightly joined. Thus, the reader whose critical reflections stem from training in the visual fields also has something to say in this case, because he or she can describe the ways in which the range and nature of images create an unforeseen or unexpected universe to which we may adapt (and from which we subsequently position ourselves). The pictures of Karl Marx and Adolph Hitler, for instance, are true iconographical monuments the poet mischievously reframes through the savvy composition of each text and the book itself. On the one hand, these images speak to the reader as icons of the twentieth century that he or she recognizes “naturally,” and, on the other, they are seen anew, as enigmas to be deciphered, due to the unusual contexts that encircle them. Thus the goal is not only to reframe the textual but also the visual, according to the sharp intervention of the artist/poet who weaves them together so that a unique and condensed cosmogony of reflections and intersections springs forth and compels the reader to address it fiercely.

Humor is a fundamental trait that links the visual and textual features of La nueva novela. For Martínez, as much as for Huidobro, the poet’s—the creator’s—intelligence grounds itself in a knack for contradictions whose objective is to sharpen the unfolding of paradoxes. Yet, Martínez prefers the humor of Lewis Carroll, Jean Tardieu, and Yoko Ono to the kinds of acrid and absurd black humor that, taken to an extreme, would acquire a nihilistic feel. Martínez’s use of Carroll links him to a type of illuminated text supposedly confined to a readership of children, and a literary tradition in which paradoxes “innocently” inscribe themselves in the construction of the text and its language; Tardieu connects him with the practice of a sophisticated literature of the absurd that pays playful attention to a number of philosophical problems; Ono draws him nearer to the twentieth century’s tongue-in-cheek, anti-conventional tumult of the sixties, to the practices of conceptual artists, and to the poem—this no less than Tardieu—conceived as assignment or homework. In this case humor, introduced as an apparently docile mechanism that refrains from emphasizing the virulent edge of its grotesque side, does not lose sight of the critical challenges presented by language, logical discourse, poetic discourse, and its traditions, as well as political and philosophical reflections. No less than for Huidobro, humor is an intrinsic part of Martínez’s creative intelligence. And what brings him even closer to his avant-garde precursor is the type of apparently tame humor he privileges which, in turn, distances him, in a remarkably subtle way, from the more corrosive, Kafka-like humor evidenced in the madness of Nicanor Parra’s poetic version of an insane individual. For instance, the ars poetica present in Parra’s “La montaña rusa” from Versos de Salón ends with the following lines, “Claro que yo no respondo si bajan / Echando sangre por boca y narices” (71) (I’m not responsible if you come down /
With your mouth and nose bleeding). In other words, the outcome of the anti-poem is violent because of the sharp contradictions at work in the text. In Martínez’s view, as the “Pequeña cosmogonía práctica” from the “Respuestas a problemas de Jean Tardieu” (9–33) section demonstrates, conflict does not necessarily have to result in a bleak outcome. When the cartoon character chooses to turn the gun he has aimed at his own head towards the portrait of the woman he loves—and subsequently destroys it—suicide does not resolve the obvious conflicts present in the character’s current love relationship. What the poet offers here is not avoidance of a conflictive situation, since the cartoon character experiences it and has to make a decision, but a shift in viewpoint. As Martínez’s choice was to represent the character’s conflict through one four-frame cartoon piece whose style is necessarily direct and concise, the implied perspective that permeates the representation of the conflict is neither virulent nor grotesque but clearly witty. Here it is possible to observe a close parallel with those “trastocamientos lúdico-humorísticos” (playful-humoristic displacements) that Huidobro’s writing triggers, according to Saúl Yurkievich (Obra poética XVII). The productive mix of humor and creative intelligence shows in the avant-garde poet’s conception of Altazor and in his deliberate preference for a type of humor that keeps itself at a distance from the grotesque and from madness as socialized sickness, while at the same time adopting the shape of a meditative and melancholic gesture. Here, one finds a telling difference in tone that similarly distinguished the work of two twentieth-century protagonists of cinematic humor, Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin.

More specifically, La nueva novela’s humor engages the reader with unexpected, disconcerting alternatives of thought interwoven with fantastic dimensions. As such, humor offers the poet the possibility of adopting a rhetorical strategy inclusive of dissonant and eccentric elements to undertake the renovation of a stereotyped point of view. This is what Martínez’s insertion of Christian Morgenstern’s “Nasobema lyricum,” for example, surreptitiously accomplishes. Works of imagination for Martínez, as well as for Huidobro, follow their own disconcerting kind of logic. In other words, they may seem to lack a self-consistent design, but in fact their efficacy depends on a peculiar code that challenges formulaic readings for which non-resolving contradictions would bear no fruit. Martínez expects his reader to fully participate in the game the poet’s wit sets up, to engage joyfully in what serious undertakings that game may introduce—its reflections on space, transparency, and literature, for instance—and also to place such undertakings under erasure because they play a role in a more ambitious, unstable puzzle. Huidobro’s attentive rewriting of comic passages, on the other hand, demonstrates his concern for incorporating humor as a poetic device and not simply according to the importance that it
attains in the public communication of the joke. Grounding Altazor’s voice in sheer musicality in canto seven of his poem, Huidobro ran the risk of making a costly joke at the expense of avant-garde poetry, a sort of cosmetic gesture that would possibly contribute nothing of relevance to the tragic unfolding of the character’s trajectory. Placed in context, however, the disconcerting musical game of canto seven and the melancholic humor embedded in the fall of Altazor take on the stature and consistency of an incantation recited at the crucial moment of the character’s climactic disappearing. Interestingly, pinpointing the critical distance between the tongue-in-cheek stance and assertive poetic mood in both texts—Martínez’s clever citation of Morgenstern’s poem and Huidobro’s canto seven of Altazor—is difficult because both involve a rethinking of such boundaries through the creation of an unforeseen intersection. If this is so, one must read the positive gaze, that unapologetic sort of “white” humor Huidobro practices and Martínez tenaciously pursues, not simply as a naïve approach to writing but as a conscious choice grounded in a poetics that sets up a telling distance, first, from the solemnity of a grandiloquent pathos and, second, from a virulent, sharply sarcastic, polemic humor. For Martínez, as well as for Huidobro, this distance is paramount because it clearly positions them among poetic discourses for which the game, as a magic formula of pleasure that emulates the playful mischievousness of childhood, is an essential component. The creative subject in this case is “a little God” under erasure because he also understands himself, either by choice or due to an unavoidable strategy, as a tenacious, mischievous, little child, who thrives in the haphazard wonders of language and who finds himself right at home in the poetic productivity unleashed by those sudden, unconventional treasures. Anchored in this privileged locus of creativity, both Martínez and Huidobro share in the utter joy elicited by writing a poetry that pushes language games to the limit.

However, sobering topics such as political power as historically experienced by the individual—along with a distanced, caustic viewpoint—also play a role in La nueva novela. The section “Epígrafe para un libro condenado: La política” (Epigraph to a Condemned Book: Politics) may appear to be an extraneous addition to a book that invests so much time and effort in cleverly exploring poetic and philosophical questions through visual and textual features. But the author has left traces of the careful incorporation of this “outside” in several preceding instances: the book cover, which includes the picture of houses stricken by a catastrophe, as well as the back cover, where the reader is asked to complete an assignment that consists in devising “two exit routes” from a prison house symbolically represented by squares of graph paper;¹² the section “El desorden de los sentidos” (Disorder of the Senses) which includes a drawing of Napoleon and a picture of Hitler; the iconic faces of Marx and Rimbaud that appear
together in three different sections, thus giving shape to a structure of citations unique to *La nueva novela*. Thus the consideration of power in its broader or more historical sense is an important facet of Martínez’s book.

If one pays attention to the reoccurrence of the Marx-Rimbaud pair in more detail one observes that such repetition characterizes the pair’s insertion in the public imaginary as trivial objects of massive popular consumption. As the “El eterno retorno” (The Endless Return) section shows, this insertion may even take on the dimension of an esoteric absurdity. The faces of both men appear next to each other in commercial advertisements in English: one that advertises a poster depicting a cyclist Rimbaud and another that shows a pamphlet describing Marx as a likely representative of a satanic sect (7). Next, the same portraits of Marx and Rimbaud reappear twice in the section “Tareas de aritmética” (Arithmetic Assignments), thus revealing themselves as crucial pieces of a formidable cultural heritage whose gravitas and symbolism dissolve through the collage’s wicked, irreverent mixing of purely visual signs. Thereafter, in “El poeta como Fantomás (el autor) como Rouquine” (The poet as Phantomas, the Author as Rouquine) the same faces reappear as border-town outlaws on a poster in English that offers a reward of two thousand dollars for their capture. By choosing to depict the ultimate, transcendental weight of the characters’ iconic faces through a whimsical twist, Martínez conveys their zest for self-exclusion and resistance to the status quo. Lastly, Martínez represents in cartoonish fashion the two characters in “La nueva novela: el poeta como Superman” (147) (The New Novel: The Poet as Superman). To Marx’s face, Martínez attaches the body of Superman, and to Rimbaud’s, the cartoonish, naked body of a woman. And though the note at the bottom of the page emphasizes the playful equivalence between Superman and “a young Chilean poet” who could be no other than Martínez himself, the reader cannot put aside the fact that the Superman figure comes linked to Rimbaud’s as a naked woman. The cartoon joke, if one delves a bit into its possible implications, performs not only a parodical feminization of Rimbaud and a hyperbolic re-masculinization of Marx, it makes evident the ludicrous subordination of an idealized individual (Rimbaud) to an overpowering older man whose thick and grayish beard is the seal of a benign patriarchal figure (Marx). As one can see, the friction between philosopher and poet is not solved but exploited: Martínez playfully highlights the conflict to dramatize the cartoonish subjection of one figure by another.¹³

*La nueva novela*, then, tellingly suggests the damaging subordination of the poetic to the philosophical-political through cartoonish renditions of gender. As he does in other moments, by allowing the reader to choose among multiple reading options, Martínez does not resort to a vocal declaration of principles but to a veiled, detached perspective he articulates
through the silent working of images barely disturbed by surrounding words. Thus his writing participates in a literary project in which history becomes a poetic feature kept at bay from the symbolic as well as the literal reverences of a dulling pathos by a carefully calibrated humor that is more campy than kitschy. The strength of Huidobro’s writing, on the other hand, resides in a sense of humor that opens the door to fantasy, to language games, to a vision of the poem and the book—Altazor would be the paradigm here—that exalts the whimsical side of the avant-garde word and turns it into a poetic device seeking to bring about a cultural liberation of great magnitude. The forward-thinking poet’s goal is to push his playfulness to the highest possible degree of expressivity and creativity. Thinking through the political and cultural relevance of Huidobro’s avant-garde commitment, one becomes aware of its uniquely Latin American design. This delight in the foundational word associated with the luring quest of the riddle—with the musicality inherent in the spellbinding alchemy of a strategic punning—goes hand in hand with the conception of the poet as an international citizen, whose voice comes out of that vortex where linguistic, artistic, and political boundaries crisscross. For this reason, Huidobro’s interest in the revolutionary project of the political avant-garde, as evidenced by his “Elegía a la muerte de Lenin” (Elegy to the Death of Lenin), does not simply obey an empty cosmopolitan whim but an actual appreciation of the representative, dignifying, legitimating role the aesthetic object (the poem) plays within the concert of international voices. Thus, if to celebrate a majestic symbolic figure of the revolution (as is the case in “Elegía a la muerte de Lenin”) Huidobro does pay his debt to a blatantly hyperbolic rhetoric, he also makes sure to reintroduce a dash of veiled cleverness as it transpires in the line that closes his elegy. After the poem’s lengthy panegyric enumeration, the text ends by precisely echoing that initial formulation—“El poeta es un pequeño dios” (the poet is a little god)—so intimately linked to Huidobro’s creationist poetics and yet often considered a peculiar seal of naiveté, individualistic pretension or sheer poetic affirmation. The fact is that the last line of the poem, “Desde hoy nuestro deber es defenderte de ser dios” (From now on our obligation is to protect you from being god), unexpectedly reintroduces a healthy dose of critical detachment that runs counter to the grandiloquent rhetoric of his elegiac text. And this helps Huidobro to crucially displace the loaded rhetoric his own writing was advancing so ostentatiously. Regarding Juan Luís Martínez’s self-effacing attitude, Pedro Lastra and Enrique Lihn have written: “[la conducta de Juan Luís Martínez] es más bien la de un ‘sujeto cero’ que se hace presente en su desaparición, y que declara e inventa sus fuentes, borgeanamente”14 ([the location of Juan Luis Martinez] is rather that of a ‘zero subject’ that comes to presence through his disappearance, and that declares and invents his sources, in a Borges-like fashion). In a similar vein, Huidobro’s poetic disappearances may have anticipated Martínez’s
placing of the author’s name under erasure in La nueva novela, and the intrinsic anti-authoritarian cleverness of that move allowed his own poetry, his own ludic word games, to carve out a healthy unorthodox space in which to flourish.

Notes

1. Zurita made these remarks while participating in the presentation of Tevo Díaz’s Señales de ruta/Road Signs documentary (2000: 34 minutes) at the Gonzalo Rojas bookstore, in September 2007. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Spanish into English are mine.

2. The description of an interval in “Differánce” by Jacques Derrida brings us back to the figure of the trace: “An interval must separate the present from what is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being, and singularly substance or the subject” (13).

3. Martínez does not attempt to deny the worth of those who preceded him nor deny the worth of those who along with him contribute to poetic writing in Chile. Neither does he intend to make his writing subject to his predecessors and, for this reason, he criticizes, in Note 5 from La nueva novela, the search for a simplistic paternal filiation in the work of young poets. At the end of the first paragraph he states, “Los pájaros más jóvenes como también así algunos escritores y músicos sufren hoy por exceso de libertad y están a la búsqueda del padre perdido” (126) (The youngest birds as well as some writers and musicians suffer today from an excess of freedom and keep searching after their lost father).

4. Jaime Concha observes this self-positioning of Huidobro in the very unfolding of the writing of Ecuatorial: “Lo que antes era instalación centrípeta en un obelisco cultural, ahora es consciencia de confines. Huidobro percibe en este instante los límites interiores del centro, que se vuelve, de este modo, remoto. De ahí entonces el salto a la perifería, en un prodigioso recorrido, fugaz y sorpresivo para nosotros que nos creíamos en Europa...” (73) (What was before a centripetal inscription within a cultural obelisk, now is awarenes of borderlines. Huidobro perceives in this instant the interior borders of the center that, thus, becomes remote. For us, who still believed ourselves in Europe, this explains the leap to the periphery through such prodigious, fleeting, surprising path).

5. Gwen Kirkpatrick underscores the parody of the “subject who knows” whose function would be to directly counteract the dissemination of the deconstructed subject at work in La nueva novela: “Una voz autoritaria pretende guiarlos por este laberinto, impartiendo instrucciones, postulando los problemas (proveyéndonos espacios en blanco para obtener las soluciones), incluyendo notas y referencias, y asume una posición similar a la voz de Virgilio en el viaje de Dante, o por lo menos la de un instructor competente” (229) (One authoritarian voice pretends to guide us through this labyrinth, giving instructions, posing problems (inserting blank spaces to obtain solutions), including notes and references, and assuming a voice similar to Virgil in Dante’s journey, or at least the voice of a competent instructor).

6. According to Octavio Paz, the ready-made has a manifest critical function: “en un clima de no elección y de indiferencia, Duchamp encuentra el ready-made y su gesto
es la disolución del reconocimiento en la anonimidad del objeto industrial. Su gesto es una crítica, no del arte, sino del arte como objeto” (223) (in an atmosphere of non-choice and of indifference, Duchamp finds the ‘ready-made,’ and his gesture is the dissolution of recognition in the anonymity of the object).

7. In “Señales de ruta de Juan Luís Martínez,” Pedro Lastra and Enrique Lihn, writing with no little sense of humor about the reader of La nueva novela, state: “La amplitud de las referencialidades produce la reducción voluntaria del corpus de lectores, destinados a integrar un tipo de cofradía como la de los sabios de Tlön, que repite su identidad en generación en generación” (Merodeos 41) (The breath of references produces an expected reduction of the corpus of readers destined to integrate a kind of brotherhood similar to that of the sages of Tlön, which repeats its identity generation after generation).

8. Regarding the poems in Horizon Carré, George Yúdice writes: “La lectura de estos poemas es, en realidad, una circularidad remisiva mediante la cual se destacan códigos que remiten a otros códigos que a su vez remiten a otros y/o devuelven la remisión a los primeros” (42–43) (The reading of these poems is, in actuality, a looping circularity through which some highlighted codes loop back to other codes which, in turn, loop back to others and/or loop back to the first ones).

9. In this instance one should keep in mind the parallels between La nueva novela by Martínez and Purgatorio by Raúl Zurita.

10. The reader may consult the dossier “Salle XIV,” also see the essay “Vicente Huidobro’s Salle 14: In Pursuit of the Autonomy of the Object” in this volume, appendices, and more in Obra poética de Vicente Huidobro, where the range of painted poems illustrates the significance of visual games in the poet’s work.

11. Regarding the structural function of the visual design of the poem “Matin” from Horizon carré, René de Costa writes, “El texto no es simplemente una ilustración gráfica del contenido del poema sino un evento estético más definido: un evento que adquiere sentido completo en el proceso de ser leído y visto al mismo tiempo” (53) (The text is not simply a visual illustration of the poem’s content but of a more defined aesthetic event: an event that in the process of being simultaneously read and seen makes full sense).

12. In an interview Martínez offered a polysemic interpretation of the house in La nueva novela: “Ahí esas casas aluden también a nuestro paisaje, a nuestra catástrofe permanente chilena. Aunque es la situación de la literatura contemporánea también: esta catástrofe del lenguaje, la desconfianza en los lenguajes, incluso […] La casa, el derrumbe de la casa como espacio sagrado, podría venir a representar un símbolo” (Poemas del otro 97) (There those houses allude also to our landscape, to our permanent Chilean catastrophe. Though this is also the situation of contemporary literature: this catastrophe of language, the distrust in languages, even […] The house, the collapse of the house as sacred space might come to represent a symbol).

13. In “La redefinición del contrato simbólico entre escritor y lector: La nueva novela de Juan Luís Martínez” (The redefinition of the symbolic contract between writer and reader: La nueva novela by Juan Luis Martínez), Eugenia Brito reads this segment as follows: “El resto es un comic que reproduce la unión del héroe contemporáneo—impotente, homosexual, anónimo, sin nombre—con su alter ego. Unión del capitalismo y el arte: toda producción se absorbe por el sistema parece decir este abrazo paródico, cita de Saldo, poema de Rimbaud” (Merodeos 19) (The rest is a comic that reproduces the coupling between the—impotent, homosexual, anonymous, nameless—contemporary hero and his alter ego. A coupling between capitalism and art: the system swallows up any transformative work, this parodical embrace seems to say—quote from “Saldo,” poem by Rimbaud).

**Works Cited**


In spite of their undeniably central role in the radical renewal of literary language and aesthetics that took place in the early twentieth century, one rarely finds the names of Ezra Pound and Vicente Huidobro together in studies of literary modernism.\(^1\) It is almost as if North and South America had something at stake in separately mapping out their access to modernity, each focusing solely on its relation to Europe as source and as stage of the modern. This essay attempts to superimpose these maps to reveal coincidences and contrasts in the career of both poets, attesting not only to personal parallels but, more importantly, to the way in which the pattern of their explorations shows common cultural concerns and zones of tension. The main optic used to assess the “parafluence”\(^2\) of these two authors will be the notion of translation, understood not only as the transfer of format or meaning from one text to another, but also in the larger sense of travel as spatial and mental displacement. I will thus focus on the activity of translating texts from and into languages other than one’s mother tongue, and also discuss the effects of displacement and contact with other contexts in the works of these writers.

The many innovations that Pound and Huidobro produced can only be understood as a result of these displacements. It is also in the context of displacement that some of Pound’s and Huidobro’s innovation appears less as pure novelty than as renewal, return of archaic or primitive attitudes and forms, thus yielding a more complex portrait of the modern and of avant-garde aesthetics than we are used to accepting, as well as suggesting a less linear historical narrative. This experience of displacement, and the destabilization of usual coordinates that it implies, is intimately related to what Antoine Berman has called “l’épreuve de l’étranger” (the experience of the foreign) in his book on the German Romantics bearing that title. This notion constitutes an encounter with the foreign that necessarily leads to a new relation with one’s own linguistic and cultural heritage, sometimes to the point that there is no possible return to anything that can be properly called “one’s own,” as is the case, for example, of Hölderlin and his relation to the Greek language.
It is perhaps no coincidence that it is only in the domain of translation that we find evidence of a possible contact between these two writers. In an interview with Ángel Cruchaga Santa María, Huidobro declares: “there is [. . .] a young English [sic] poet by the name of Ezra Pound, who has also become close to us, and who wishes to translate my *Horizon Carré* into his native tongue” (Huidobro, *Obra* 1637). That translation never actually took place, and the vagueness of Huidobro’s reference to Pound (assuming he is British rather than American, declaring his willingness to become a part of the Creationist school of which Huidobro was always practically the sole member) makes one doubt the concrete character (or even the veracity) of such intentions, but also suggests the possibility of some degree of mutual acquaintance, probably in Paris around 1917. It is, however, mostly in their afterlives that Huidobro and Pound’s legacies meet: in the late modernism of Octavio Paz, who names both of them as predecessors, and in Eliot Weinberger’s translation of *Altazor*, a Poundian project in its attempt to capture the poem’s vital energy rather than its mere form or content as separable entities, with a preface that also evokes the possibility of an encounter between the two poets. The many similarities of their artistic endeavors, however, have failed to give rise to a detailed examination of their works, since readers have been busy mapping out both poets’ relation to the European avant-garde movements in which they were more centrally involved. More important than an understanding of what they were looking at in Europe might be the fact that they were both looking toward it, for different reasons, and that both of them were doing so from a relatively marginal position. Young North and South American poets traveled to the “old continent” in search of something missing in their native regions, needing to establish their reputations in Europe, facing challenging changes in the process of making themselves a name in the European literary scene.

Latin American culture defined itself from very early on in opposition to its Northern neighbor, what Martí called the “other America.” On the other hand, North America tends to see the land to its South as a poor, charmingly exotic neighbor, characterized in its literature by magic realism’s exuberance and Neruda’s passionate Latin Lover / guerrilla fighter revolutionary rhetoric. In the following pages I will attempt to complicate that caricature without obliterating the important contrasts between the two authors examined here, nor denying the many obvious cultural differences at stake in their aesthetics. At the heart of this attempt is the conviction that modernism as a historical period and as an aesthetic tendency can only be understood when considered as a global phenomenon, rather than in terms of the more common, geographically restricted perspective.
A Double Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

Pound had an important role in getting James Joyce’s famous *Bildungsroman A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* published serially, and also hailing it as a modernist masterpiece. The novel concludes with its protagonist, Stephen Daedalus, leaving his native Dublin for Paris, where he hopes to become successful as an artist, an ambition that everybody and everything around him seemed intent on stifling. A similar feeling of frustration must have been experienced by young aspiring writers growing up in cities far from the places where “things were happening,” such as Santiago de Chile and Hailey, Idaho, or suburban Philadelphia, where Huidobro and Pound were born and grew up. A departure was thus necessary, and Europe the inevitable destination.

Huidobro had already lived in Paris in 1900 (at the age of seven), in the charge of French governesses while accompanied by his family. His whole career is marked by the “mental Gallicism” (the expression is Juan Valera’s, describing the poetry of Rubén Darío) that characterized the intellectual and artistic elite of fin de siècle Latin America. Pound, born in 1885, had first traveled to Europe when he was thirteen, together with his mother and an aunt, and returned to the old continent in 1902 (accompanied by his parents). In 1906 he made his first solo voyage, when a scholarship gave him the chance to go to Madrid to study Lope de Vega’s work as part of the research for a doctoral dissertation he would never complete. But it was not until 1908 when, after being fired from his teaching position at Wabash College due to his having let a lady lodge in his private quarters, he decided to settle down in Europe. Huidobro did not reside there until 1916, when he left Chile with the (probably nominal) post of *ad honorem* civil attaché to the Chilean embassy in Italy. He was already married and the father of two children. After a short stay in Madrid, he took up residence in Paris. Before leaving Chile, he had been editor of the journals *Musa Joven* and *Azul* and published the books *Ecos del alma*, *Canciones en la noche*, *La gruta del silencio*, *Las pagodas ocultas*, *Pasando y pasando* and *Adán*, a prolific output whose titles indicate how much his early production remained within the shadow of Rubén Darío’s *modernismo*. One could in fact argue, against what he often declared, that it was not until his arrival in Europe that his writing acquired real avant-garde traits, as opposed to the imaginary populated by nightingales, stars, butterflies, and roses that marked his first literary attempts.

Aside from the frustrations derived from being inserted in “half savage countries” (as Pound refers to his place of birth in a poem), and the feeling that their literary projects would be more likely to succeed in a less static environment, both undoubtedly share the desire to gain recognition in what Pascal Casanova calls “the world republic of letters,” whose capital at the
beginning of the twentieth century clearly was Paris. But there are also important differences in their departures. Pound, like a naïve female character in a Henry James novel (for instance, Isabel Archer in The Portrait of a Lady), was particularly fascinated by Europe’s old civilization: he was especially keen on acquiring familiarity with its artistic achievements in a way that betrayed that they were not naturally his, but needed to be appropriated. He came to Europe after benefiting from a relatively complete university education (probably more complete than the one acquired by Huidobro during his years at the Universidad de Chile), and in fact his first stay there was linked to academic research in Romance philology. Pound never completely got rid of a certain academic and pedagogical bent, and even in his most Dadaist or Futurist phases he conserved a high degree of respect for history and for tradition, even if it was always a heterodox and alternative tradition. In fact, his most significant work, The Cantos, can be read as a portable encyclopedia of what he considered the most valuable political, ethical, aesthetic and historical knowledge, a pocket guide for a future political leader (whom he would later identify with Mussolini). In this he is perhaps most similar to Jorge Luis Borges, who chose, however, to exert his penchant for erudition in a more ironic vein.

Huidobro, in contrast, was interested above all in getting in touch with the new, with novelties and change, with continuing the modernista search for what Ángel Rama called “a certain isochronism, by way of which Latin American literary transformations closely follow what is going on in the world’s literary centers” (36) and what Octavio Paz has described as “a doorway into the present” (“La búsqueda del presente”). The concern with inserting elements from European and universal traditions that we find in Pound’s work is mainly absent from Huidobro’s writing, as is Pound’s constant practice of imitating, translating, citing and commenting on texts from that tradition. Huidobro, on the other hand, is concerned mostly with “catching up” and being on the cutting-edge of the latest trends in the literary field, and in general seems rather disdainful of academic inquiries—though some of his manifestos occasionally drift into a somewhat professorial tone.

This marked contrast is not only a matter of diverging personalities (in fact, in many ways Huidobro and Pound were very much alike), but has to do with their cultural and social backgrounds in ways that transcend their individual careers. At the time, the possibilities offered by a university education in the U.S. and Chile were quite different (this, sadly, is still true to a great extent). Moreover, Huidobro’s upper-class background did not make it imperative for him to acquire any sort of professional training, nor did he need to earn a living; his life in Europe was most of the time quite comfortable, and he even contributed to financing the Nord-Sud review, living off of the money sent to him by his family. Pound, on the other hand,
after giving up on a conventional academic career, tried out several jobs, and managed to scrape together a living (complemented first by an allowance from his parents and then by his wife’s income) by working as a tour guide, a musician’s manager, a journalist, a private secretary, and as a lecturer. These differences, whose significance I do not intend to explore in depth here, are surely relevant to the ways in which both conceived their brand of modernism, and are also indicative of more general traits of how literary modernity operates in the U.S. versus Latin America (or at least some “varieties” of modernism).

For both writers, getting in touch with what was being done in Europe at the time required a revision and a renewal of their poetics. Pound himself condemned his early books as “a collection of stale creampuffs” from which there were “no lessons to be learned save the depth of ignorance, or rather the superficiality of non-perception” (Poems & Translations 1256). In a famous anecdote, Ford Madox Ford literally rolled on the floor as a sign of disapproval of Pound’s abundant archaisms, criticizing a literary style exceedingly marked by his devotion to the Pre-Raphaelites and to a decadent fin-de-siècle aesthetics—an inheritance comparable, in many ways, to the type of language favored by Rubén Darío and his disciples, which was clearly the main influence behind Huidobro’s early poetry.

In Pound’s case, the late Romantic, grandiloquent tone of poems such as “Grace before Song” (which opens A Lume Spento), or “Prelude: Over the Ognisanti” would in very few years be replaced by the drastic concision of his “In a Station of the Metro,” the best known example of his Imagist school (“The apparition of these faces in the crowd: / petals on a wet, black bough” [287]). These are, of course, extreme and biased examples: much in Pound’s early poetry announces his later achievements, and his late poetry often returns to the archaic and adorned tone he claimed to have completely abandoned. Pound himself proposed an ironic self-portrait of his literary development in his Hugh Selwyn Mauberley:

For three years, out of key with his time,  
he strove to resuscitate the dead art  
of poetry; to maintain “the sublime”  
In the old sense. Wrong from the start—

No hardly, but, seeing he had been born  
In a half-savage country, out of date,  
Bent resolutely on wringing lilies from the acorn . . . . (P&T 459)

It would be out of character for Huidobro to ever confess his initial belatedness. He was too proud and lacking in self-irony to paint such an unflattering portrait of himself or some alter-ego, as Pound did. In fact, he always insisted that he had already developed a highly innovative
conception of poetry before coming to Europe, and apparently even falsified the date of publication of an edition of El espejo de agua as a way to prove it. To put the facts in perspective, however, it is clear that even if the alleged date of publication were true, the successive changes suffered by the poems as they were translated into French for publication (in Nord-Sud, and then as part of Horizon Carré) indicate a struggle to leave behind the original poems’ postmodernismo or late symbolism and reach out to modernity, whose signs are the suppression of punctuation marks and the insertion of capital letters and blank spaces and a “less is more” suppression of adornment. One could say that Huidobro’s poetry had to change clothes in order to be presented in European society, but perhaps it would be more adequate to say it acquired a new skin, or that it metamorphosed into a new body, as we will soon see, thus contradicting Karl Kraus’ aphorisms about translation.

“Bottom, Thou Art Translated”: Modernity and Translation

René de Costa, in his En pos de Huidobro, has already provided an excellent, detailed description of the changes summarily listed above, but, in my opinion, he did not emphasize enough that these changes took place in the course of a translation process, a linguistic transfer that prolonged and confirmed the geographic transfer from Santiago to Paris. Unlike Pound, who avidly translated poetry between all the languages he could learn, Huidobro seems to have practiced translation only as a way to produce French versions of his own poems. His self-centered nature in fact prevented him from becoming an importer of French novelties into the Spanish-speaking world; rather, it led him to filter all those novelties through his own work. Just like Shakespeare’s character Bottom, in A Midsummer Night’s Dream (the passage quoted above is an exclamation of surprise due to his magical metamorphosis into a donkey), Huidobro produced a translated version of himself, a metamorphosis of his own poems that actualized and internationalized them, dressed in the latest Parisian fashion to conceal their provincial origins and make a successful literary début. These translations were also a rite of passage, in that they marked the beginning of a period of writing in French, which situated Huidobro in the category of writers whose texts, as described by Antoine Berman:

Carry the mark of their foreignness in their themes and in the language in which they are written. Often similar to the French of French authors, their language is separated by a more or less perceptible abyss, like the one that separates our language from that of the passages in French of War and Peace and Magic Mountain. This French has a close relationship to the French in which we translate, since in the first case we have foreigners writing in French, and thus
imprinting a foreign seal upon our language, and in the second we have foreign works rewritten in French, which inhabit our language’s dwelling and mark it with their foreignness. (18)

Though in this passage Berman seems to stress the negative aspect of these writers’ relation to French—their use of a language they will never be able to fully master—we can also remember how in the section of Mann’s novel written in French, the foreign language is described as intoxicatingly liberating, a language whose very strangeness allows the protagonist to express feelings he would never be able to express in his own language (“Moi, tu le remarques bien, je ne parle guère le français. Pourtant, avec toi je préfère cette langue à la mienne, car pour moi, parler français c’est parler sans parler, en quelque manière—sans responsabilité, où comme nous parlons en rêve” (Mann 356) [As you can very well see, I do not speak French. With you, however, I prefer this language to mine, since for me speaking French is speaking without speaking, or something of the sort—speaking without responsibility, like we do when dreaming]).

The alien medium wherein a writer using a language other than his own (if such a thing as “owning” a language is possible) is also an invitation to leave behind the dead weight of inherited habits, reflexes, and rhetorical usages. Even the simplest of words in an alien tongue can shine with the prestige, fascination, and mystery of streets in a foreign city (this was the reason, for example, why Rilke wrote in French for a while, to move away from a German with which he had become too intimately familiar). In a way, one only really leaves a place when one leaves its language: let us remember Enrique Lihn’s complaint that he never left “horrendous Chile” because he never left behind “the speech that the German Lyceum / inflicted upon me on its two patios, as if in a regiment” (53). A survey of the avant-garde writers that adopted French as literary language at some point in their careers (a list that would include Gangotena, Moro, Eliot, Beckett, Marinetti, and Ungaretti among others) would clarify much of what is at stake for Huidobro in that choice,12 but one should also return to Darío, who wrote “En entendant du coq gaulois le clairon clair / on clame: Liberté! Et nous traduisons: France! / Car la France sera toujours notre espérance, / [. . .] / la France est la patrie de nos rêves” (Poesías completas 838) (Listening to the clear clarion of the French rooster / one cries out: freedom! And we translate: France! / Since France will always be our hope / [. . .] / France is the fatherland of our dreams). It is curious to observe how Huidobro’s work prolongs this dream in which the word freedom can be translated as France, a translation that takes place within the scope of the adopted language, where one can speak as in a dream, “comme nous parlons en rêve” (like we do when dreaming). Ironically, it is in his poem Altazor that Huidobro returned to his native language (probably due to the fact that the complexity and length of this poem made it impossible for him to compose it directly in
French, as he attempted to do initially), and it is in that very same poem that he declared: “One should write in a language that is not the mother tongue” (Altazor 5). Ironically, this parti pris (which rings more like an ethical or existential imperative, rather than a mere aesthetic preference) is enunciated precisely in the Spanish to which the author has been forced to return, attracted by the mother tongue just as Altazor is attracted by the beloved’s eyes, or by the grave (“Better believe it, the tomb has more power than a lover’s eyes. The open tomb with all its charms” (5).

In a prior essay I address a possible psychoanalytical reading of the mother and father figures in Altazor’s “Preface,” in which this notion of writing “outside” of one’s mother tongue is at issue, by linking it to the poet’s rejection of his subjugation to “mother nature” in his well-known “Non Serviam” manifesto. For this discussion, however, perhaps another manifesto, “Le créationnisme” (written originally in French), is more relevant, namely:

Si pour les poètes créationnistes ce qui est important est la présentation du fait nouveau, la poésie créationniste devient traduisible et universelle car les faits nouveaux restent les mêmes dans toutes les langues.

Il est difficile et même impossible à traduire une poésie dans laquelle domine l’importance d’autres éléments. Vous ne pouvez pas traduire la musique de mots, les rythmes de vers qui varient d’une langue à l’autre mais quand l’importance du poème tient avant tout à l’objet créé il ne perd dans la traduction rien de sa valeur essentielle. Ainsi que je dise en français: “La nuit vient des yeux d’autrui” ou en anglais “Night comes from others eyes” [sic] l’effet reste le même, les détails de langue deviennent secondaires. La poésie créationniste acquiert des proportions internationales, elle passe à être la Poésie, et elle est accessible à tous les peuples et races comme la peinture, la musique ou la sculpture. (Obras 1332)

(If, for creationist poets, what matters is the presentation of new facts, creationist poetry is translatable and universal, since new facts are the same in all languages.

It is difficult, even impossible, to translate a poem wherein other elements are the essential. One cannot translate the music of words, the rhythm of lines, which change from one language to another. But when the importance of the poem comes from the created object, it does not lose any of its essential value in translation. So, if I say in French: “La nuit vient des yeux d’autrui” or in English “Night comes from others eyes” [sic], the effect remains the same, the linguistic details become secondary. Creationist poetry acquires international proportions, it becomes Poetry, accessible to all peoples and all races, like painting, music, or sculpture.)

This text’s main tenet is, of course, not true. As any student of the topic or practicing translator knows, when one translates any sentence from one language to another, transformations ensue, even in the cases of closely
related languages from the Romance or Indo-European families, not to mention the more drastic changes that happen in the case of more remote languages. As Roman Jakobson remarked in his “Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” in utterances whose main purpose is conveying a meaning, it is usually possible to find approximate equivalents where those changes are not relevant for communicative purposes. In poetry, however, when the message is precisely the way in which signifiers are grouped together, taking into account all of their material properties as well as their meaning, a translation that does not introduce important alterations is not possible. Hence Robert Frost’s famous “Poetry is what gets lost in translation.”

Only in a brief example such as the one given by Huidobro is it possible to convince the unprepared reader that what he claims is true, but even when one looks more closely at his phrase, one can see that the version he himself proposed does introduce important changes motivated by what Walter Benjamin called each language’s “mode of signifying” [Art des Meinens]. To give only one example, when the feminine gender of the word “night” disappears in English, the effect ceases to be the same, and the Spanish “ojos ajenos” (in implied contrast to “ojos propios”) is more specific than the English “others eyes” [sic], which is also not quite idiomatic.13 In short, even if we realize that the conception of poetry as untranslatable rests on questionable assumptions about what poetry is—and without adding to the long ongoing debate on whether poetry can be translated or not, or whether translation is possible at all14—we can confidently assert that translating always entails a certain degree of change related to a language’s phonetic, lexical, and syntactic idiosyncratic qualities, but also with respect to the complex web of cultural expectations that are part of its nature.

I do not wish, however, simply to correct Huidobro’s naïve assumption, but rather to understand the logic that lies behind his mistaken dictum. His announcement of a poetry that could be translated without any loss whatsoever—and thus universal in nature—is the exact opposite of Robert Frost’s assumption, and it can be considered in light of discussions that were at the center of the poetics of German Romanticism. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy pointed out long ago in The Literary Absolute that the roots of many of the motifs of avant-garde manifestos and movements can be found in the reflections of the early Romantics of the Jena group. In fact, Huidobro’s dream of a universally accessible poetry is a variation of Novalis’ idea of a “universal progressive poetry,” while it also reverses the emphasis on the mother tongue that is at the center of many Romantic poets’ and thinkers’ work. Huidobro’s position seems in fact closer to Goethe’s, who thought that all good poetry was essentially translatable because it had a prose nucleus that could be expressed in any language.15
One could also assert that Huidobro’s conception bears certain resemblances to the early Wittgenstein’s position: if Huidobro claims that poetry rests on new facts (“faits nouveaux”), Wittgenstein claimed around the same time (his *Tractatus* was published in 1922, *Altazor* was begun in 1919) that “the world is the totality of facts, not of things,” and ultimately deduced from that proposition a logical language that was completely translatable, since it depended to a great extent on formal logic (a position his later * Philosophical Investigations* would severely revise). Huidobro’s affirmation that he could produce a totally translatable poetry partially rested on the fact that he had already produced a number of poems in French in spite of an insufficient command of the language, because the novelty of his poetry was not based on the particularities of any given language, but on what Pound called “phanopoeia,” or visual imagery conveyed vividly through words. In fact, Pound agrees that phanopoeia is the most translatable of poetry’s procedures (“[it] can be translated almost, or wholly, intact”), much more so than logopoeia (which “does not translate; though the attitude of mind it expresses may pass through a paraphrase”) and melopoeia (the musical aspect of poetry in terms of rhythm and sound arrangements), which is for him virtually untranslatable (“It is practically impossible to transfer or translate it from one language to another” *Literary Essays* 25).

Huidobro’s choice of example is not unmotivated: that darkness derived from alien eyes deeply resonates with the experience of the foreign, with encountering different eyes that stare at us as strange, uncanny, unfamiliar beings. This night born from the gaze of others reminds me, in fact, of a poet apparently at the opposite end of the spectrum—Gabriela Mistral—who shared with Huidobro an acute awareness of what it meant to leave the “horroroso Chile” (horrendous Chile). She participated in the inebriating joy of newly acquired freedom, the cleansing baptism of travel by sea, but also in the experience of the ghosts that we carry with us in our speech no matter where we go, and also that of a body that’s shaped in its most involuntary gestures by its mother tongue. If Huidobro’s poetry focused on the thrill caused by displacement, Mistral best expressed its anguish, which also found its way into Huidobro’s poetry: it is not by chance that the poem that began by proclaiming the imperative of leaving behind maternal language ends with pre-verbal or post-verbal language. If the others, in Mistral’s poem “The Stranger,” speak “strange tongues and not the moved / language my mother speaks in golden lands” (381), one could say that Huidobro, intent on separating himself from that loaded language and all that it entails, ended up himself adopting the unintelligible babbling of strangers for one who does not understand their language—“Ai a i ai a i i i o ia” (*Altazor* 150)—a purely vocalic chant that leaves meaning behind in a way comparable perhaps to Hugo Ball’s sound poems or Khlebnikov’s Zaum language.
If one outcome of the search for a totally translatable language is a poetry based exclusively on visual imagery (or on the virtual ideograms proposed by Pound), another is poetry that seems to have reached the “condition of music” that Pater said all arts aspired to by leaving meaning completely behind—rejecting logos in favor of rhythm and melody, open mouths united in a single cry that takes one back to an infancy that precedes the symbolic stage. One possible interpretation of these impulses could emphasize the return of a Lacanian “troumatique,” a hole in the symbolic network through which the real that cannot be expressed in normally-structured language rears its ugly head and shatters imaginary projections of self. Or one could choose to compare the unimpeded circulation that Huidobro’s poetry aspires to in the context of multinational capitalism, following Rama’s shrewd analysis of modernismo as an adaptation of the logic of capital to the literary field. The poem that loses “nothing of its essential value” in translation, and that seems in fact to acquire surplus value in that transfer, is an entity as full of “theological niceties” and “metaphysical subtleties” as commodities according to Marx (163). Both lines of interpretation, however, risk turning Huidobro’s gestures into mere symptoms, so a reading that does full justice to them will have to wait for further development in a later project.

Postcards from Hades:
A Philadelphia Yankee in Homer’s Greece

Pound never completely relinquished his native language, perhaps because English was, at the time, more of an asset in the “international republic of letters” than Spanish. He did, however, produce a small number of poems in French and Italian, and numerous prose pieces in those languages, especially the latter, during his time living in Rapallo. But more relevant than these gestures is the fact that his Cantos uses English only as a canvas on which to project all the languages with which he had been in contact: a typical passage of The Cantos can switch from Classical Greek to Chinese and Provençal within a few lines, and often the English we read is translating from some of those languages, sometimes to the point that, as was the case with Hölderlin, the target language becomes unrecognizable in the attempt to render the qualities of the source language. Such a polyglot adventure would not have been possible, however, without a highly tense relationship with his own maternal language, which we can perhaps understand further by looking closely at a passage of this work.

Most of the first poem in The Cantos is a translation of a section of Homer’s Odyssey, the nekia where Odysseus interrogates the spirits of the dead about his future. Pound’s source, however, is not the Greek text. He
translates instead from a Latin version by Andreas Divus from 1538, not so much because of Pound’s insufficient knowledge of Greek, but because he wished to highlight from the very start the importance of moments of transmission of poetic technique through the operation of translation, understood with all of its resonances of transformation (Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* are one of Pound’s preferred sources) and travel (Odysseus the wanderer remains one of the central characters in Pound’s poem, albeit in often barely recognizable variations). One could perhaps say of Pound that he was more interested in transmission itself than in the exact conservation of what was transmitted, caring more about a work’s generative force than its particular form, thus privileging a work’s dynamic qualities over the integrity of its textual features. He also often proposed abbreviations of texts, condensation as a way to better appreciate their living qualities and putting aside what in them had become only dead weight. As it happens with many of Pound’s citations throughout *The Cantos*, this excerpt from Homer is also incorporated in interesting ways, one of which may be relevant for our argument.

In the translated passage, Ulysses sacrifices a bull to attract the shadows of the dead—that of Tiresias, in particular, whom he wants to interrogate about the outcome of his journey (finding out whether or not he will be able to return to Ithaca). As soon as the blood starts to flow into a pit dug for that purpose, the shadows of several dead people come up, but Odysseus pushes them away from the blood until Tiresias comes. The passage is worth quoting at length:

Here did they rites, Perimedes and Eurylochus,
And drawing sword from my hip
I dug the ell-square pitkin;
Poured we libations unto each the dead,
First mead and then sweet wine, water mixed with white flour.
Then prayed I many a prayer to the sickly death’s-head;
As set in Ithaca, sterile bulls of the best
For sacrifice, heaping the pyre with goods,
A sheep to Tiresias only, black and a bell-sheep.
Dark blood flowed in the fosse,
Souls out of Erebus, cadaverous dead, of brides
Of youths and at the old who had borne much;
Souls stained with recent tears, girls tender,
Men many, mauled with bronze lance heads,
Battle spoil, bearing yet dreary arms,
These many crowded about me; with shouting,
Pallor upon me, cried to my men for more beasts;
Slaughtered the heards, sheep slain of bronze;
Poured ointment, cried to the gods,
To Pluto the strong, and praised Proserpine;
Unsheathed the narrow sword,
I sat to keep off the impetuous impotent dead,
Till I should hear Tiresias. (*The Cantos* 3-4)

After this passage comes a dialogue with Elpenor, a former member of Odysseus’ crew, recently deceased in an accident at Circe’s island, who asks that his body be buried, and next—followed by the “And” that characterizes the work’s paratactical style—are the following lines:

And Anticlea came, whom I beat off, and then Tiresias Theban,
Holding his golden wand, knew me, and spoke first:
“A second time? why? man of ill star,
Facing the sunless dead and this joyless region?
Stand from the fosse, leave me my bloody bever
For soothsay.”
And I stepped back,
And he strong with the blood, said then: “Odysseus
Shalt return through spiteful Neptune, over dark seas,
Lose all companions.” And then Anticlea came. (*The Cantos* 4-5)

There are several remarkable features of this passage, but I would like to focus on the two mentions of Anticlea and what they condense—and by condensing, hide. Anticlea is Odysseus’ mother: in the original poem, she is mentioned as one of the shadows that appear, eager to drink from the bull’s blood. Upon seeing her, Odysseus, who did not know that his mother was dead, breaks into tears, but he still keeps her away from the blood until Tiresias drinks and speaks. At that point, Odysseus asks his mother for the cause of her death, and she answers that it was the sadness caused by his absence.

This is a typical case in which Pound sacrifices a passage for the sake of concision and speed, but in this situation (as in many others) one can suspect that the omission is linked to the tensions and unconscious drives inherent to his aesthetic project. Without purporting to make the author lie down on the analyst’s couch, we can read this act of textual selection and censorship as a way to screen or block a conflictive relation to a maternal figure that could be associated with his native language and region. As with many other conflicts, Pound seems to refuse to deal with the consequences of his leaving behind his own language, family, and country, in what seems like a repressed version of Lihn’s “fear to lose, along with the mother language, / all of reality” (53). These types of contradictions haunting *The Cantos’* polyphonic texture are not so far from Huidobro’s charged relationship to Spanish, to his country of origin, and to the traditions he supposedly left behind in his rebellion against “Mother Nature,” whom he decided to serve no more (in the manifesto “Non Serviam”).
Returns and Detours: Two Versions of the Traveler

Looking in parallax at these two writers’ careers and their efforts to free themselves from inherited modes of thinking and writing, as well as leaving behind the “dead weight of night” that any such inheritance inevitably entails, one can only marvel at the agility with which they adapted themselves to a new environment’s fashions and quirks, not only learning to play by new rules but often outdoing their masters. For both, translation was not just a means to become better known abroad, nor a way of appropriating foreign mannerisms—it was a formative experience by way of which the two poets learned the tricks of their trade. Huidobro transposed and thereby refined his own early poetic attempts, believing that nothing was lost or destroyed in that process, while Pound expanded the possibilities of English as a literary language by making it conform alternatively to the alliterative patterns of Anglo-Saxon, to the elaborate rhyming patterns of Provençal, or to the apparent lack of syntactical links of Chinese. It seems, in principle, that Huidobro is more of an exporter, following the advice given in Oswald de Andrade’s “Brazil-Wood Poetry” manifesto advocating a poetry that could be exported, a conceit that seems well-suited to the heir of a family of wine makers. Pound, by contrast, seems in principle more of an importer, focused on bringing into English all sorts of foreign merchandise, in the form of techniques, themes, and visions, like Oswald advocated in his later “Cannibalist Manifesto,” where he proposed that Brazilian (and, by extension, Latin American) poets should “devour” all of Europe’s cultural heritage as a way to appropriate it. Pound’s voracity led him to perhaps bite off more than he could chew, but it also drastically expanded the horizon of poetry in his own language and on the international stage, producing a vision of European and world cultures that enriched these cultures’ vision of themselves. For both Pound and Huidobro, trafficking in translation was a key moment in their adventurous journeys. They also both experienced, probably thanks to translation, the limits of language, the moments in which language comes close to just being a series of musical sounds, unintelligible babble, or exceedingly dense discourse exceeding the comprehension of most readers.

Both writers also started their careers writing in a style that they would soon describe as out of date, passé, and both would work hard to get rid of that style without eliminating all of the traces of it. In both cases, the battle against hardened traditions was fought under the banner of freedom, especially in the case of measured verse, which they attacked with a passion that suggests far more than counting feet and syllables was at stake. In fact, in announcing a poetry that did not define itself by means of regular line divisions corresponding to the page’s limits, they laid the groundwork for an exploration of images as poetry’s true medium, and understood the
consequences of such a conception for translatability. Their initial production after this “liberation” was characterized by a certain ascetic condensation, an impulse to get rid of adornments and reach a sort of classical or even primitive simplicity. Both then turned to more elaborate modes of expression, to longer formats that they perhaps did not entirely master, as attempts to produce larger works in an era when experience had stopped being transmissible, and the possibility of narrating was in crisis.\textsuperscript{19} Perhaps it was also an acute awareness of this crisis that pushed them to propose the highly self-confident and even cocky theories put forth in their various manifestos, whose sometimes simplistic principles, stated forcefully as self-evident truths, cannot really account for the complexity of their poetic praxis.

For both, the moment of the nostos (the Homeric return journey) was far from a triumphant reclaiming of their own territory, over which they could rule peacefully as a modern Odysseus. Like Homer’s protagonist, both seemed intent on returning at some point but also seemed to know that the justification of the journey lay less in reaching their destination than in delaying the moment when travel ends (“Mon âme telle qu’Ulysse est lente à revenir” (My soul, just like Ulysses’ returns slowly) writes Huidobro at the end of “Ombres chinoises,” and his Altazor is a poem composed in the vertigo of a freefall whose final destination seems to be the grave). They also knew that, if travel had actually been a transforming experience, there was no real going back to the same point of departure, since place and self had been transformed by time. Pound was brought back to the U.S. from Italy, charged with high treason because of his pro-Mussolini broadcasts from Rome during the Second World War (it was his first aerial trip over the ocean). Huidobro returned to Chile seriously wounded during his participation as press correspondent in the same war, and shortly thereafter died from these wounds. Pound’s career ended instead in Europe, to which he returned after more than ten years of seclusion in an insane asylum, to which he had been sent after being declared mentally unfit for trial as a way to save him from the death penalty that his wartime activities might have earned him.

Considering these biographical aspects, it is not surprising that both poets’ late works share a certain tone of disappointment for the failure to make good on many of their youthful promises. In both, memories from happier times alternate with traumatic evocations of the horrors of war and its aftermath, and with the constant affirmation of levels of experience that transcend those horrors, particularly erotic love. One of Huidobro’s posthumous poems reads:

\begin{verbatim}
Éramos los elegidos del sol
Y no nos dimos cuenta
Fuimos los elegidos de la más alta estrella
\end{verbatim}
And Pound, returning in one of the final fragments of The Cantos to the language that brought memories of his days traveling in the South of France, writes,

M’amour, m’amour
what do I love and
where are you?
That I lost my center
fighting the world.
The dreams clash
and are shattered –
and that I tried to make a paradiso
terrestre. (The Cantos 802)

These biographical and stylistic traits are, of course, not exclusive to these two authors, insofar as they are the result of their idiosyncratic temperament as much as of the encounter of that temperament with historical circumstances shared with many others. The central importance of physical and cultural displacement is also not a unique trait in Pound’s and Huidobro’s oeuvre—in fact, Raymond Williams proposes that this lack of fixed roots is among the causes of the formal features of modernism’s language. According to Williams, artists moved constantly between large cities, and their constant border-crossing (especially after the First World War),
worked to naturalize the thesis of the *non*-natural status of language. The experience of visual and linguistic strangeness, the broken narrative of the journey and its inevitable accompaniment of transient encounters whose self-presentation was bafflingly unfamiliar, raised to the level of universal myth this intense, singular narrative of unsettlement, homelessness, solitude and impoverished independence: the lonely writer gazing down on the unknowable city from his shabby apartment. (34)

Give and take a few points, this portrait may apply not only to the two authors on whom I focused above, but also to the Neruda of *Residence on Earth*, most of which was written abroad, and whose syntax shows traces of the English the author spoke as a consul in Rangoon. Even more literally, it is often said of Oswald de Andrade that he discovered Brazil by looking out the window of his apartment at the Place Clichy in Paris, and his explorations of his country’s primitive features is heavily indebted to the gaze of the foreign tourist. But this does not apply exclusively to Latin or Anglo-American authors; the same could be said of many European authors—let us think of Rilke and his relationship with Russia and France, Ungaretti writing in French from Africa, or Pessoa initiating his work with poetry written in an English characterized by echoes from Spenser and Shakespeare.

In her book quoted above, Pascal Casanova proclaims the city of Paris to be the capital of a republic of letters that is relatively independent from political or economic power structures, and that all writers at the beginning of the twentieth century who wished to be taken seriously had to be recognized first in that capital. She is obviously too eager to turn the importance of Paris as the place of obligatory rite of passage in the avant-garde into a conceptual elaboration of Gallic supremacy in the world of letters, but her analysis nevertheless provides several interesting clues for a global understanding of modernism and modernity, as well as a challenge to again attempt to understand cultural productions in terms of Goethe’s *Weltlitteratur*. Perhaps her centripetal reading of the republic of letters needs to be corrected by a centrifugal reading that focuses not only on the ways writers from the margins were drawn to the center, but also an attempt to understand how the center was affected by these writers’ presence. We might also think about how writers from the center were nevertheless irresistibly attracted by peripheral places and cultures in an overview of modernity that does more justice to Yeats’ sharp diagnosis that “things fall apart, the center cannot hold.” In the process of modernity, where all things melt into the air, the practice of translation is always at the center of these highly charged exchanges between places, times, subjectivities, and languages.
Notes

1. A first version of this essay was written for Professor David Lenson’s seminar on Ezra Pound and Anglo-American Modernism at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. A longer version was presented at the ACLA Conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 2002, and then published, in revised format, in Taller de Letras 40: 2007. I have made several modifications and revisions for this version of the essay.


3. I will use the Spanish modernismo to refer to the literary period that precedes the avant-garde in Hispanic literary history, which must not be confused with modernism. Perhaps the very terminological difference is indicative of some of the differences and points of contact between both traditions.

4. For an excellent assessment of Pound’s relations to the academic world and to pedagogy in general, see Gail McDonald’s Learning to be Modern: Pound, Eliot, and the American University.

5. “Lord God of heaven that with mercy dight / Th’alternate prayer wheel of the night and light / Eternal hath to thee, and in whose sight / Our days as rain drops in the sea surge fall” (P&T 21)

6. “High dwelling ‘bove the people here, / Being alone with beauty most the while / Lonely? How can I be, / Having mine own great thoughts for paladins / Against all gloom and woe and every bitterness?” (P&T 69)

7. I must thank professor David Lenson for pointing out the extent to which Pound returns to a language clearly influenced by the poetry of the Rhymers’ Club (including authors such as Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Victor Plarr, and Arthur Symons) whenever he wants to express a deeply felt personal emotion throughout his Pisan Cantos.

8. For a detailed discussion of the history of this polemic, see Goic’s notes to El espejo de agua in his superb edition of the Obra poética, as well as Waldo Rojas’ “El fechado duduso de El espejo de agua.”

9. Karl Kraus writes: “A linguistic work translated into another language is like someone going across the border without his skin and putting on the local garb on the other side.” And also: “One can translate an editorial but not a poem. For one can go across the border naked but not without one’s skin, for, unlike clothes, one cannot get a new skin” (Zohn 160).

10. See Waldo Rojas’s essays “En torno a Automne régulier y Tout à coup” and “Huidobro, Moro, Gangotena” for an excellent discussion of Huidobro’s insertion in the French literary milieu.

11. The complete poem reads: “Nunca salí del horroroso Chile / mis viajes que no son imaginarios / tardíos sí—momentos de un momento—/ no me desarraigaron del eriazio remoto y presuntuoso / Nunca salí del habla que el Liceo Alemán / me infligió en sus dos patios como en un regimiento / mordiendo en ella el polvo de un exilio imposible / Otras lenguas me inspiran un sagrado rencor: / el miedo de perder con la lengua maternal / toda la realidad. Nunca salí de nada” (A partir de Manhattan). One might wonder whether Huidobro left anything at all, and suspect that he never got rid of the arrogance of the heir of an aristocratic family. Nevertheless, his defiance of the fear of losing all reality with one’s maternal language is admirable, in contrast to Lihn’s fearful confession.
12. See my “Antes de hablar: El ‘Prefacio’ a Altazor.”
13. Huidobro was probably thinking “other’s eyes,” which would still be a rather unusual phrasing in English, where one would probably say something like “another’s eyes.”
14. For a lucid discussion of the (im)possibilities of translation, see Emily Apter’s The Translation Zone.
15. See Berman for a more detailed discussion of Goethe’s notion of translation.
16. See North’s The Return of the Modern for an interesting discussion of Wittgenstein’s troubled relations to translation. Waldo Rojas, in his “Huidobro, Moro, Gangotena” proposes that Huidobro’s assumptions about translation rest on an idea of language less as system than as nomenclature.
17. The image of the gaping mouth as a state that precedes articulate language and anticipates the oral delights of poetry comes from Abraham and Torok’s The Shell and The Kernel. My “Antes de hablar” elaborates more on this perspective as a way of discussing Altazor.
18. The phrase “el peso de la noche,” originally used by Diego Portales, is the title of a famous novel by Jorge Edwards, where it represents the dead crust of values that resists any attempt at change or renewal in a society.
19. I am referring to the central idea of Walter Benjamin’s famous essay “The Storyteller.”
20. Paulo Prado wrote in the preface to his Poesia Pau-Brasil that Oswald “in a trip to Paris, from the height of an atelier at the Place Clichy—belly button of the world—discovered with amazement his own country” (67).

Works Cited

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The reader’s participation or intervention in literature—as well as that of the spectator in contemporary art—is an integral, even hostile, part of the creative process. With this in mind, I am interested here in addressing the encounter of visual image and poetic writing in a dialogue between art and friendship, with respect to the serious modality of art illustrating poetry and of the co-participation of the arts.¹

I will consider Joaquín Torres García’s original artistic proposal to his friend Vicente Huidobro in Poèmes Paris 1925.² It is a hand-crafted book, 18.5 cm x 13 cm, which the Uruguayan painter prepared himself.³ The lengthy hard-cover book, which can be found in the library of the Getty Research Institute, only contains five of the 32 numbered poems which comprise Huidobro’s book, specifically, the first five—“1” through “5”—of Tout à coup (1925).⁴ Torres García has accomplished here an original and innovative intervention in honor of his friend. The Uruguayan painter published a number of original books with the letter style he makes use of here and with a set of well-defined symbols which he applied widely in his Constructivist paintings.⁵ Motivated by the text, Torres García introduces new visual signifiers which are not to be found in the repertoire or code of symbols he has established. We might call this dialogue between poetry and painting “illustrations” or “illustrated poems.” The painter adds onto the original poetic text a drawing, a stroke of the pen, a figure which he inserts between lines of verse and between words.

The text of the poems is handwritten in imitation of print type in both the lower and the upper-case and, occasionally, only in the upper-case.⁶ The letters are in italics with a slight inclination to the right in both the lower and upper case. The family to which the characters belong is the Grotesque, Antique or Sans Serif, with distinctive traits on the foot except for the words “Torres García,” the letter “M” and, in a few distractions, the letter “A.” In the Uruguayan painter’s writing, the stems of the letters “b,” “d,” “l,” and “h,” have an original flourish or ornament toward the left, and the “g,” toward the right.
Modalities of Intervention and Dialogue between Poetry and Graphic Design

The originality of the Uruguayan Constructivist painter’s proposal consists in mixing or interlacing the lines of verse and the words with visual figures, small hieroglyphics, or symbols entwined with the words. In some cases, these establish equivalences with words and, in others, with phrases of varying length.

Torres García has intervened in the poetic space in several ways, all of which generate a variety of meanings: (1) the original text of Huidobro’s poems is organized in a series of lines justified in each case at the left margin, in complete lines of verse or in segmented lines of verse or enjambments; the Uruguayan painter’s intervention modifies the original disposition, introducing several breaks and enjambments, fragmenting the continuous lines of verse, thereby giving way to a new spatial organization of the poems; (2) the original poems do not extend for more than a single page in length; Torres García’s versions extend each of the poems to 5, 4, and 5 pages respectively; (3) in the original text of these poems, there are no words or lines of verse in upper-case; the Uruguayan painter uses upper-case in several instances in each of the poems; (4) the painter is unaware, in two cases, of a mistake made by the printer of the original text who introduced a period in the middle of a verse, and another one at the end of each poem; (5) finally, he does not correct one of the misprints in the original text, which he repeats, and misspells three additional words.

If we focus our attention now on the first poem, we are able to observe that in poem “I,” each page includes one small symbolic drawing. Each of these is the direct signifier of a word which the text modifies with prior and subsequent qualifiers, which, in turn, poetically alter the immediate meaning of the visual image: “Les deux ou trois / charmes des escaliers / du hasard sont / INCONTESTABLES” (The two or three / charms of the stairs / of chance are / UNDENIABLE). Torres García writes in upper-case a word that in the original is in lower-case. This is another modality of intervening in the text. Nonetheless, the painter is unable to represent the “two or three charms of the stairs of chance,” which cannot be conveyed visually. The painter can only limit himself to drawing the steps of a staircase which begins and ends nowhere, remaining faithful to the “created image” of “des escaliers du hasard” and its other qualifiers.

In principle, the symbolic drawings that accompany words such as “yeux,” “lune,” “oiseau,” represent graphically only the signified of these words and not the “created image” of the phrase of which they are but a part. Torres García writes, for example, “Là-haut / Montez / vers l’avenir précis” (Up there / Ascend / toward the precise future). Rather than point toward a distant horizon, the painter draws the image of a cliff or peak which the text...
urges the reader to ascend “vers l’avenir précis.” Thus, here he privileges the literal transcription over the reference to the distant horizon and the sunset (the actual reference here), though he does put the semantic stress on the ascent itself. The painter intervenes in the text a second time by writing in the word “CIEL” in upper-case. In this instance, moreover, Torres García repeats the typographical error of the first edition, where a period is introduced after the word “externes.” It is understandable, however, that the poems should have no punctuation marks of any sort, for these had already been eliminated by Huidobro in his earlier “spatialist” stage and, programmatically, from the moment of his involvement in Nord-Sud.

Torres García subsequently writes, “les vagues du / CIEL / caressent les sables” the waves of / THE SKY / caress the sands). In these lines of verse, it is in the visual image of the inverted undulation of “les vagues du CIEL,” or else, in the undulated formations of the sand dunes—representing the horizon as a place of synthesis of contraries—that the painter gives tribute to the poet’s Creacionismo and the poetic experience of the unusual. This synthesis is one in which the painter’s symbolic drawings and the text and its meaning bear the closest correspondence to each other.

The lines of verse that immediately follow introduce the poetic experience of the unexpected or the unusual—tout à coup—which correlates with the poetic experience of the five poems, and, in fact, with all the poems that make up Huidobro’s book Tout à coup: “Une certaine chaleur / s’échappe / des plis des drapeaux / secoués para le vent / De mât à mât / les / mots se balancent” A certain color / escapes / from the folds of the sails / lashed by the wind / From mast to mast / the / words swing to and fro). Note the alliterative and paronomastic play that illustrates the movement—“De mât à mât / les / mots se balancent.” In this case, the graphic symbol of the double-masted sailboat appears in metonymic response to the mention of the sails and the masts; that is, as parts for the whole. It is interesting to note that the double-masted sailboat, which is one of the symbols recurrently used by the Uruguayan artist in his other Constructivist pieces, is here fitted with sails as a way to establish a closer correspondence with the image suggested by the poet. The painter repeats the typographic error of the first edition in his transcription of the original poem: “du plis,” which should read “des plis.” The poem concludes with the lines “Et un oiseau / mange les / fruits du / LEVANT” And a bird / eats the / fruits of the / EAST). Once again, the artist intervenes in the text as he alters the letter-case by writing the word “LEVANT” in upper-case within the visual image of the rising sun. This solar image represents the bird composed of two curved strokes (suggestive of wings), which are added to the semicircle and to the rays of the sun: it is the bird that devours and is itself devoured during the moment of poetic creation.
In poem “2,” Torres García alters the distribution of the symbolic drawings of each page. Of its four pages, two contain only one symbolic drawing, another contains two and one has no drawings at all. The first page is illustrated with the image of the spider on a mirror: “Sur le miroir / une araignée qui / rame comme une / barque régulière” (On the mirror / a spider that / rows like a / steadily moving boat). Of all the visual images, this one is the most direct, though, naturally, it does not allow for any movement. On the next page, the artist writes the words “LES GESTES / DERRIÈRE” in upper-case; a few lines down, he writes “NAUFRAGE."

The third page opens with the image of the clock, another of the recurring graphic symbols in Torres García’s repertoire, which precedes and refers to “À l’heure des hirondelles” (At the hour of the swallows). The final lines of verse on this page are preceded by the visual image of a pair of eyes, though the design of these eyes does not convey the imaginative transformation that modifies them: “Ta femme a les / cheveux blonds / neufs / (graphic drawing of eyes) / Ses yeux sont / de jaunes d’œufs” (Your woman has her / hair blond / and new / [graphic drawing of eyes] / Her eyes are / egg yolks).

On the last page, the line “Les yeux des brunes / Sont des jaunes de LUNE” (The eyes of brunettes / Are MOON yolks) contains the simple representation of the word “LUNE” inside the drawing of the circle of the moon, as a “created image” of an egg yolk of cosmic dimensions. Moreover, Torres García writes the word “LUNE” in upper-case, in contrast to the poet’s version—although in both cases, no color is added to the visual image. And following the unusual images of the poem, some more familiar than others, the reader comes upon an unexpectedly “created” vision, complete with cosmic and luminous imagery: “Les regards satellites / Se promènent sous les arbres de l’orbite” (The satellite glances / Stroll under the trees of the orbit).

In poem “3,” the text opens with the lines: “Je m’éloigne en / silence” (I go away in / silence), and is followed by the partial image of a man representing the poetic subject of the poem as an itinerant “I.” The image of man—another symbol, together with that of woman, drawn from Torres García’s symbolic repertoire—that appears in full on the inside of the front cover of the hand-crafted book, shows only partially in the poem. It seems to reflect the uncanny reconfiguration of the poem’s speaker as a silent wayfarer who drowns under crops of prayers, as a traveler who resembles the four seasons.

Finally, Torres García writes, “Le bel oiseau navigateur / Était comme une / horloge entourée de / coton / Avant de s’envoler / m’a dit ton / nom” (The beautiful bird that navigates / Was like a / clock surrounded by / cotton / Before taking flight / it has told me your / name). This time, the painter
inscribes the word “nom” inside the drawing of a bird, in which the “n,” the “o,” and the “m” are so designed as to represent the bird’s claws.

The poem concludes with the visual image that constitutes the unexpected poetic experience: “L’horizon colonial est tout couvert de draperies” (The colonial horizon is all covered with draperies), and appeals to the reader in line with a natural and “Mundonovista” preference—the opposition between nature and artifice—: “Allons / dormir sous / l’arbre / pareil à la / pluie” (Let us go / sleep under / the tree / that looks like the / rain), followed by a period, and several strokes of the pen on the trunk and branches of a tree, suggestive both of an abstract representation of its foliage and of rain. Additionally, in this poem, Torres García writes the words “CATHÉDRALES” and “DRAPERIES” in upper-case, both of which refer to visual images defined by the metonymic allusion.

The other two poems of the book, poems “4,” and “5”—which we are not authorized to reproduce here—are also organized around the expression of a sudden and unexpected vision. Poem “4” begins with a highly original line of verse: “Tu n’as jamais connu l’arbre de la tendresse d’où j’extrais mon essence” (You have never known the tree of tenderness out of which I extract my essence), and goes on to reveal, toward the end, the surprising effect of the poem: “Cherche bien sous les chaises / Cherche bien sous les ponts / Il y a des morceaux d’âme sciés para mon violon” (Look carefully under the chairs / Look carefully under the bridges / There are pieces of soul sawed off by my violin). And, finally, poem “5” introduces the unusual experience of the “scaphandrier du roi” (royal diver). In the onomatopoeia of the unusual sounds “Le la bémol des belles histoires / Joué dans la harpe d’anciennes pluies / Nous montrent à peine ce qui luit” (The A flat of the beautiful stories / Played out on the harp of ancient rainfalls / Shows us but barely that which shines), we arrive at the “tout à coup” that properly makes the poem a part of the book.

**Conclusion**

As we know, the poems of *Tout à coup* are identified by numbers, from 1 to 32, and lack titles, which draws our attention to the importance of the title of the book itself, *Tout à coup*—that is, to the fact that the book’s title is by extension the title of each poem in the book. The effect sought by each poem is none other than to elicit the revelation of the unexpected, of that which arises suddenly, as a surprise or revelation in the context of an unusual mode of representation, a dimension of the marvelous, the unusual, or the surprising. This means, finally, that the book’s title is also the textual matrix of the book as a whole and of each poem in particular.
Such a poetics forms part of a new stage in the development of Huidobro’s creacionismo and is itself a response to the Surrealist manifestos of 1924 and to manifestos published by other avant-garde movements at the time. Huidobro rejected the pretended meaningfulness of automatic writing, the role of chance, and madness, marking off the differences between creacionismo and Surrealism in his book Manifestes (1925). In this work, he revives the notions of Platonic delirium and of a creative superconsciousness. In his two books published in 1925, Automne régulier and Tout à coup—especially in the latter one—Huidobro stresses the autonomy of the “created image,” the “created description,” and the “created object.” In this way, the autonomous poem challenges the reader with the introduction of new and daring imagery, and achieves the particularly original revelatory effect and expressivity of the unexpected, the surprising, the unusual, and the marvelous.

The dialogue between art and poetry established by Torres García in his intervention in Huidobro’s poem “1” intersperses the text with small symbolic drawings in order to stress the semantic traits of ascent, horizon and sunset—all well-defined Huidobrian motifs concerning the moment of poetic creation. In poem “2,” he represents the luminous cosmic beauty in which the human meets the celestial; in poem “3,” at issue is the vision of the traveling poet who rejects the colonial landscape in favor of nature. And finally, poem “4” speaks of poetry’s own ambiguity, while poem “5” emphasizes the difficulties of apprehending the effective luminosity of ancient poetry.

Notes

1. There are, of course, other possible forms of intervention, particularly in poetry and in visual poetry. Some of the modalities of intervention of literary writing by the art of painting include translating the text into another language, changing the color or the formal aspects of the poem, adding color where there is none in the original, and inviting the reader to intervene in the original poetic text. In fact, one of the distinctive traits of Vicente Huidobro’s “painted poems” consists in blending the text with a visual representation of its semantic and suggested content.

2. We reproduce part of this text with the permission of the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, California, USA. VICENTE HUIDOBRO, POÈMES, PARIS, 1925. The inside cover reads: “Tout a coup [sic], 1922–1923; the poems follow, numbered ‘1’ through ‘5.’” In the pages of coated paper included in this issue, only three of the five poems from Torres García’s book are reproduced. In my edition of Vicente Huidobro’s Obra poética (Madrid: ALLCA XX, 2003, p. 676), I called attention to the following: “It is important to point out the existence of a slender hand-crafted, hard-cover volume in the Library of the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, California, the front cover of which reads: “For Vicente Huidobro this ‘document’ witness to our old and fraternal spiritual friendship. J. Torres García. Montevideo, October 16 1945.” It has a total of 28 handwritten pages, while several others are
entirely blank. It is a beautiful handwritten edition, with calligraphic characters, of the first five poems of the book: 1 through 5. The Uruguayan Constructivist painter intersperses the text of each poem with small drawings in an entirely original manner, and it is a shame that the project was not completed. All in all, it would be of great interest to see this remarkable ‘document,’ hitherto unknown, finally published."


6. The Estudio de Diseño OBRA from Uruguay introduced a new font type taking Torres García’s particular alphabet style as a model, naming it MontevideoJTG(TrueType) for the characters, and MontevideoJTGSymbol(TrueType) for the graphic symbols. Vid. www.montevideo.gub.uy.

7. Torres García’s transcription of Huidobro’s texts contains the following misprints: du plis>des plis, which repeats the misprint of Huidobro’s first edition, as well as new ones: nuefs>neufs; ruisseaux>ruisseaux; nuit>nuit.

Works Cited


Poèmes Paris 1925
TOUT A COUP

1922 - 1923.
1.

Les deux ou trois charmes des escaliers du hasard sont INCONTESTABLES
Tout est calme derrière
les miaulements exter-
nes. Là-haut
Montez

vers l'avenir précis
ou les vagues au
CIEL caressent les sables

Mais il ya quand même

Dans les surprises de l'eau

Quelques îles semées par les explorateurs
qu’ils nous dévancent

Une certaine chaleur s’échappe du plus des drapeaux secoués par le vent

De mât à mât les
mots se balancent

Et un oiseau mange les

fruits du

LEVANT.
2.

Sur le miroir

une araignée qui
rame comme une
barque régulière
Vers les chansons du marécage
Elle chatouille les souvenirs à la surface et les gestes derrière
Au milieu du silence la mer naufrage
À l'heure des hirondelles
Dieu que les femmes sont belles
Ta femme a les cheveux blonds nus,
Ses yeux sont de jaunes d'œufs
Les yeux de brunes
Sont des jaunes de
LUNE

Parmi les eaux
sans musique
Les regards satellites
Se promènent sous les arbres de l'orbite.
3.

Je m'éloigne en silence

comme un ruban de soie

Promeneur des ruisseaux
Tous les jours je me noie
Au milieu des plantations de prières
Les cathédrales de mes tendresses chantent
La nuit sous l'eau
Et
ces chants sont les îles de la mer.

Je suis le promeneur
Le promeneur qui ressemble aux quatre saisons
Le bel oiseau navigateur
Était comme un
horloge entourée de coton
Avant de s’envoler
m’a dit ton nom

L’horizon colonial est
tout couvert de draperies

Allons
In 2003, Cedomil Goic published the most definitive bibliography compiled thus far on works by and about Chilean writer Vicente Huidobro. He included not only original works, but also Huidobro’s published correspondence and interviews, as well as the sizable volume of criticism and secondary texts on Huidobro. Goic’s bibliography begins with Huidobro’s works meticulously arranged by categories (poetry, novels, drama, essays, compilations, audiovisual representations, and dispersed works), numbering each title with sub-numbering of editions within a given group, subsequently ordered by date of publication. This organization places Huidobro’s creative gift in context both in terms of genre and chronology. Since Huidobro’s works were often published and republished separately, in the next section of his bibliography, Goic extensively annotated this tendency, arranging the publication of an individual poem or essay, etc., in coordination with the title of the original publication—see, for example, the poems from *Horizon carré* (Goic 2003: 229–30). Goic also arranged Huidobro’s individual works by topic; for example “Hispanoamérica” (2003: 252). Finally, the bibliography presents the vast secondary work on Huidobro.

My original intent here was only to write a bibliographic essay about the relevant publications since 2003, thus making current Goic’s already extensive work. However, during my research, I discovered several items that were not included in the 2003 bibliography. Some of the items I include here may be contained in the bibliographies Goic cites (259), but these other bibliographies are often very specialized. For example, see Goic’s own writings on Huidobro’s poetry or María Ángeles Pérez López’s bibliography on Huidobro’s narrative. I also believe that the reader will find it useful to have these dispersed references compiled into one source. I am indebted to the dedicated work of both Dr. Goic and Dra. Pérez López for the structure and content of what follows. I am also grateful to my colleagues in other libraries who graciously verified and completed several citations for me.

I utilized Goic’s basic formula for this bibliography, but I have simplified it. The arrangement is as follows: original works arranged alphabetically by title (editions, then compilations, referencing Goic when
appropriate); compilations, individual poems from Huidobro’s published compilations (arranged by title of the original publication), translations, and adaptations; bibliography, biography, and correspondence, etc.; criticism (general works, then those focused on a specific title). I followed Goic’s lead by including a section on unpublished academic works such as theses and dissertations. And since the Pérez López bibliography particularly focused on book reviews, especially from newspapers, I added a section on book reviews covering both Huidobro’s works and the secondary literature, adding the more extensive reviews from Pérez López and noting her original numbering. Under Goic’s numbered original works section, he has “Grabaciones, versiones musicales, teatrales, videos” (2003: 227–28), in which he includes a miscellany of audiovisual works concerning Huidobro. Based on this idea, I have concluded my compilation with three sections: Huidobro as the subject of other authors’ original literature, Huidobro’s poetry in music, and Huidobro in other art and audiovisual works. In a very few cases, the item cited was not available for me to review. For these citations, I have indicated “N.pag.” in place of specific pagination.

Now for a word about Huidobro in cyberspace. Depending on how one searches for Vicente Huidobro, the results of Google™ search will yield anywhere from 269,000 to 350,000 potential websites. These, of course, range from sites specializing in commercial sales of Huidobro’s publications to aficionados’ transcriptions, and renderings of the poet’s works. I chose to focus solely on sites that provided substantial or unusual information, and links (see, for example, Vicente Huidobro Papers, 1886–1968 listed under correspondence). Predictably, the majority of the most significant sites originate in Chile.

As with any published bibliography, my work here will quickly become out of date. Also, I am aware that there will be relevant works that I have missed. Any omissions or errors are my own, but will surely be the basis for analysis and commentary by future bibliographers.

Editions of Huidobro’s Works

*Altazor y otros poemas.* Lima: Embajada de Chile en el Perú, Universidad Nacional Mayore de San Marcos, 1993.

**Individual Works, Selected Passages, and Compilations**


“Selección de poemas de Vicente Huidobro.” Atenea 467 (1993): 75–79. Includes: “Arte poética,” “Canto II,” “Noche y día,” “El paso del retorno.” Goic’s bibliography included all of the articles about Huidobro from this issue, but did not list the works by Huidobro.


Individual Poems from Huidobro’s Published Compilations

Altazor


Canciones en la noche


El ciudadano del olvido


“Cuentos diminutos”


**Manifestes**


“El más hermoso juego”


**Mío Cid Campeador**

“Jimena.” *Atenea* 467 (1993): 97–99. Fragment from the novel. Goic’s bibliography included all of the articles about Huidobro from this issue, but did not list the works by Huidobro.


**Poemas árticos**


**Tour Eiffel**


**Tres novelas ejemplares**

Últimos poemas

Ver y palpar

Vientos contrarios
“Greguerías y paradojas.” Atenea 467 (1993): 143–44. Excerpt. Goic’s bibliography included all of the articles about Huidobro from this issue, but did not list the works by Huidobro.
Translations and adaptations


Altazor

HIOL ♦ Hispanic Issues On Line ♦ Spring 2010


Atentado celeste

“La poesía es un atentado celeste”


“Balada de lo que no vuelve.”


Cagliostro


El ciudadano del olvido

“Tenemos un cataclismo adentro”


Ecuatorial


bibliography followed by a bilingual (Spanish and English) version of “Ecuatorial.”

*El espejo de agua*
“Arte poética”

*Horizon carré*

*Maniféstes*
“Manifeste Peut-être”

*Monument à la mer.*

*Papá o el diario de Alicia Mir*

*Poemas árticos*
“Express”

*Temblor de cielo*

Bibliographies

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**Criticism of Specific Works**

**Adán**


**Altazor**


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**Año nuevo**

**Cagliostro**

**Canciones en la noche**
“Triángulo armónico”
“Cuentos diminutos”

Ecuatorial

*En la luna*

*Espejo de agua*

*Gilles de Raíz*

*Manífestes*
“Non Serviam”

*Mío Cid Campeador*


Papá o el diario de Alicia Mir

Poemas árticos

“Balandro”


“Vermouth”


*La próxima*  

*Sátiro*  


*Temblor de cielo*  

*Total*  

*Tour Eiffel*  


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Afterword

Vicente Huidobro’s Futurity Is Now; ¿Por qué?

Robert Kaufman

An anecdote, which happens to occur about 12–18 months after the Fateful 1968 (and—as you have probably guessed—although 1968’s Tet Offensive, the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, most of Paris and Prague, two parks, one convention hall, and various streets in Chicago, as well as numerous other international locales and events inform what follows, the most crucial reverberations and aftermaths emanate—for our purposes—from Mexico City’s Plaza de Tlatelolco, during the armed forces’ October 2 massacre of protesting university and secondary students and their allies):

A twenty or twenty-one year old New York poet, translator, and critic named Eliot Weinberger gets himself to Pittsburgh to meet Octavio Paz, who has just begun teaching at the University of Pittsburgh, and whom Weinberger has been reading and translating since high school and has been corresponding with for the last couple of years, after Paz—having been shown some of Weinberger’s translations of him—had asked Weinberger to translate ¿Aguila o sol? (1950) into English (which eventually appears, in Weinberger’s translation, as Eagle or Sun? in 1976). Paz, shocked when it emerges in their Pittsburgh conversation that his precocious American translator has never heard of, let alone read the Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro, recites to Weinberger from memory the extraordinary, complexly but indisputably lyric, “golondrina” passage from Huidobro’s epic poem Altazor:

Al horitaña de la montazonte
La violondrina y el goloncelo
Descolgada esta mañana de la lunala
Se acerca a todo galope
Ya viene viene la golondrina
Ya viene viene la golonfina
Ya viene la golontrina
Ya viene la goloncima
Viene la golonchina
Viene la golonclima
Ya viene la golonrima
Ya viene la golonrisa. (105)

Somehow capable even then of being simultaneously blown away yet able to imaginatively access invaluable resources of chutzpah, Weinberger discovers—and expresses shock at the discovery—that Paz for his part has neither read nor heard of the American poet George Oppen. Paz gives Weinberger Altazor; Weinberger reciprocates by giving Paz Oppen’s Of Being Numerous (which had just been awarded the Pulitzer). Paz apparently never wavered through the years from his assessment that “Huidobro’s great poem is the most radical experiment in the modern era. It is an epic that tells the adventures, not of a hero, but of a poet in the changing skies of language”; several decades later, the work of the young American to whom he had introduced Altazor had allowed him to add that “the English translation of this poem that bristles with complexities is another epic feat, and its hero is Eliot Weinberger.”

The history of any Latin American poet hardly needs completion—or for that matter, evidencing—through his or her translation into English and dissemination to a U.S. readership. But certain features of the sometimes barely visible U.S. poetry world’s Huidobro-reception fit intriguingly with one of the themes rightly emphasized in most, if not all of the rich, provocative essays that editors Luis Correa-Díaz and Scott Weintraub have gathered into this volume, whose title is itself that theme writ large: Huidobro’s Futurity. What that futurity is, means, or might be is of course also ours to consider here in the country in which this book is to be published. The apparent ubiquity of the question about Huidobro’s futurity—inside these pages as well as in larger communities of poetry, scholarship, and criticism—hardly absolve us from attempting further-specifying answers.

At any rate, this volume’s remarkably diverse contributions to Huidobro scholarship—featuring meditations on, to take just a few representative examples, the question and status of poetry’s and the other arts’ autonomy; the poetics of translation; relations among poetry and the other arts (literary and extra-literary); the impacts of contemporary scientific developments in, among other fields, quantum physics, and gravitational theory; Huidobro’s creacionismo and recent environmentalism or eco-criticism; the Spanish Civil War and linked crucial moments in twentieth-century social and cultural history—seek historically to judge poetry’s possibilities of proffered agency, and then perhaps to gauge, no less historically, its measurable impact. In various instances they are more—or, as the case may be, less—explicit about being led to make another judgment or two, judgments that can seem equally necessary to make and that appear necessarily to involve, to risk again stating the obvious, Huidobro’s futurity. Why? And how might U.S. poetry’s history vis-à-vis Huidobro help us better understand just why
assessments of Huidobro so often become assessments of his so-called futurity?

One way into the problem is to momentarily leave suspended, or get back to the particular contextual realities of that 1968-and-just-after, world-turning-upside-down situation in which Paz introduced Weinberger to Huidobro, and observe that, at least since the 1920s, Left artists, critics, and audiences more generally—by no means limited to Latin America—who found themselves attracted to avant-gardist and/or modernist poetics were frequently, if not constantly drawn into the problem of how to relate aesthetic and sociopolitical agency. Most specifically, how could formally difficult, experimental artworks create anything but dilemmas for those who believed that Marx, and Left culture and aesthetics more generally, had insisted that philosophy, theory, and also art should “change” rather than merely “interpret” the world?

More shortly on change, interpretation, and aesthetic semblance. For now, however, it behooves us to ask in a somewhat different formulation how to account for Huidobro’s apparently longstanding, glaring absence from the action in the U.S. poetry and poetics scene? The answer cannot just be Huidobro’s uncompromising avant-gardism, or that his poetry is written in Spanish and French, or even the conjunction of these factors. For other Latin American and European avant-gardist, experimental-modernist poets, writing in languages other than English, have been and continue to be part of U.S. poetry-culture, from questions of artistic influence to matters of aesthetic, theoretical, and critical approaches taken up by contemporary poets and critics alike. The counter-examples of poets like Vallejo, Paz, Neruda, the Brazilian concretista poets, and many others come quickly to mind, and lead us to wonder all the more that Huidobro has been so little known in the U.S. And one could add that Huidobro’s seeming absence in U.S. poetics is made all the stranger by his own emphasis on such crucial American figures as Emerson and Whitman, who were famously important to Huidobro (as they were to many of his Latin American contemporaries) in terms of both his verse and his creacionista aesthetic.

What if we took an alternate path into the inquiry, and asked how many U.S. poets and critics of, say, the last 40–50 years know the name and work of one of Huidobro’s first great critical champions, Volodia Teitelboim? It has far too often been the case in Left criticism that linkages between radical poetics and radical politics—including linkages made with the intention of arguing for causality-by-omission—have unthinkingly assumed a parallelism or even intersection between the aesthetic and the sociopolitical. But if ever there were a case where poetic justice at least appeared to demand the equation of causality in question, surely it would be Huidobro and his interpreter Teitelboim. For Teitelboim is probably the apotheosis not only in Latin America, but perhaps globally, of the radical conjunction
whose existence is at issue: the defender, through the decades, of the genuinely revolutionary character of Huidobro’s challenging, sometimes hermetic-seeming verse (starting most crucially with formal and stylistic matters), Teitelboim goes on not only to become an important Left Chilean or Chilean Marxist intellectual, but the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Chile (PCC) itself, a position almost always held, in countries with historically large and influential communist parties (like Chile), by a person known above all for trade-union and related forms of organizing. The great Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros may have taken a decade away from art to organize trade unions, but neither he nor anyone else in México thought of him primarily as a trade-unionist: he was a painter, albeit one who sacrificed years of art-making to organize workers. He was also, of course, a militant communist, but no one—least of all, Siqueiros himself—imagined him as secretario general del partido comunista mexicano; and how much less would this have been the case for any of Siqueiros’s great Left critics? Yet the opposite holds in this conjunction of Huidobro, Teitelboim, and Chile.

The reasons for that conjunction no doubt have much to do with Chile’s particular histories of art, criticism, intellectual-cultural life, and politics; and I do not wish to suggest that some unlikely acute awareness, on the part of U.S. poets and critics, of Left Chilean, and specifically Communist excitement about Huidobro’s decidedly un-socialist-realist verse, somehow has meant that Huidobro’s absence from U.S. poetry-discourse has in any important way resulted from the pressures of McCarthyism and its legacies. But one might rightly identify in both Huidobro and Teitelboim a fundamental stance of uncompromisingness, starting with a militant refusal to compromise on what might be called form’s own needs: a desire to get at roots without thereby declaring this always-experimental process to have discovered some essential substance, content, or property. In Huidobro’s creacionista verse, this entails, as various contributors to Huidobro’s Futurity underscore, the meeting of an astonishing formal constructivism with extraordinary lyrical voicing and dance-movement, the inculcation of a veritable sense of paracaídas lift-off, indeed, of aesthetic agency-effect, a sense of what it is “to create, to create, to create,” in Huidobro’s memorable triple iteration. In Teitelboim’s political-philosophical and literary-critical analysis, this finds articulation as a sort of Kantian-Marxist awareness of a humanely rationalist-constructivist capacity nonetheless brought home through—brought home as—the most profoundly affective lyricality, so that sensuousness and constructive capability are experienced, for a generative moment (i.e., in a recognized-as-aesthetic, recognized-as-“true-fiction” or “necessary-fiction” imago, illusion, or semblance), as being united, inseparable, threaded or composed through one another.
This is what, incipiently from that encounter with Paz onward, Weinberger began to understand, and what he has shared—in beginning to bring Huidobro’s poetics, along with those of kindred artists, into the mix—with the U.S. poets who also insert Huidobro into the conversation, perhaps especially Robert Duncan, Jerome Rothenberg, and Michael Palmer. Significantly, these and kindred poets have tended toward activist Left politics and decidedly formalist, lyric, modernist commitments to artistic-aesthetic experiment, while almost militantly insisting that there might well be no theorizable, nor even empirically demonstrable, causal link among the realms of activity and types of agency at issue. Once could do worse, in searching for examples, than citing Weinberger’s own searing, immediately influential “What I Heard About Iraq”—a long text composed almost entirely of Bush Administration statements about the war, whose constitutive issues include the question of whether this is a poem at all, and, if so, of what type. Read in conjunction with his passionate manifesto-critiques undertaken under the sign of both Vallejo and Oppen (written just before the war began), here he insists on the difference between poetry and even the most urgently needed, invaluable, use-or-purpose-oriented, conceptually predetermined writing.

Without it being in any way utopian—indeed, probably the opposite case holds—this more developed, sustained understanding, and practice of sometimes overlapping but certainly never unifiable poetry and politics may sit at the conjunction of some thirty years of the too-slow (but nonetheless thankfully ongoing) introduction of Huidobro and other Latin American and European avant-gardists into the poetry world of a country that, unlike most other national situations where a significant early-mid twentieth-century modernism and avant-gardism existed, did not have a mass Left party able to contend for a third or more of the electorate, and whose role in cultural matters would then be far more influential than was ever the case in the U.S. In fact, it is a kind of Left anti- (or non-) utopianism that has helped allow Huidobro’s futurity to begin to be grasped in the U.S., as it earlier has been grasped in Latin America and Europe, as most powerful when its futurity is seen as nothing more than the quite substantial reality of the conjoined present that is the poem’s writing and re-writings, publication and re-publication, translation and re-translations, reading and re-readings. In this sense, like all authentic poetry and art, the act of exceeding the meaning of extant concepts—of stretching past conceptual determination—was basic. Like Vallejo, Huidobro came to know in his bones and marrow that far from being what Marx had critiqued, this was what Marx had argued for—a notion of art, of aesthetic experience, and especially of lyric as having fundamental value in our ability to sense and utilize our critical agency. How so?
It is actually right at the heart of the final movement in *Das Kapital*’s historical critique of exchange value and commodity form. For *Das Kapital* initially makes Enlightenment economist David Ricardo the virtual hero of its commodity story, emphasizing the progressive character of Ricardo’s demonstration that what defines the commodity is not use value but production for and as exchange value—based not on particularity’s inextricable relation to use, but on a treated-as-universalizable abstraction of labor time, hence, value derived vis-à-vis an abstraction of the labor-time necessary for each product produced over against all other products within the market. Marx then steps past Ricardo, and past what has already begun to identify itself as left-Ricardian, labor-theory-of-value socialism. Marx notes that the commodity’s value derives not only from the conceptual abstraction of labor time but also, crucially, from an ongoing, sociohistorical, and now contestable judgment that this abstraction of labor time must or should be the final basis for valuation—rather than a judgment-process capable of holding that the abstraction of labor time should be a significant, but not necessarily the ruling or determining, basis for valuation, so that value finally would not need to remain determined by, but would be free to transcend (free to not be determined by) labor time.

Marx shows that this ability to transcend the conceptual abstraction of labor time as ultimate determinant of value would break open—initially, via Kantian aesthetic judgment!—exactly what Kantian aesthetic judgment by definition offers the *form* or *semblance* but not the *substance* of: an already-extant, determined, determining *concept*. In this breaking-open, stretching-past, or sidestepping of extant, substantive-objective conceptual determination, aesthetic quasi-conceptuality lets subjects feel-experience their semblance-play with conceptual form as if this play already were substantive-determinative-objective conceptuality, though a conceptuality somehow freely chosen rather than determinatively, coercively compelled. In the Kantian terms discussed above, aesthetic judgment thus begins to enact, in form or semblance, the experience and process of forming, making, or constructing something not conceptually predetermined. Marx’s historical critique of Ricardo ultimately stresses that it has been and continues to be capital’s decision—not labor’s—to make the conceptual abstraction of labor time the final, untranscendable basis, limit, or horizon of socioeconomic value. In doing so, capital ideologically proclaims the concept of exchange value (along with exchange value’s embodiment in/as commodity form and its enactment in/as mechanical reproduction) to be a matter of natural or scientific, determinate judgment. Marx reiterates (again in a quite Kantian analysis that grasps semblance-experience as what enables thought to stretch past extant conceptual determination) the need to break open this seemingly already-adequately-conceptualized question of value when he insists that socioeconomic valuation be subject to ongoing judgment (that it be subject
not to predetermined but to reflective judgment). From *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847) through *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875) and beyond, Marx will remain adamant that labor socialism’s goal of simply expropriating, nationalizing, or “socializing” exchange value and commodity production is woefully inadequate to labor’s own most pressing sociocultural, let alone socioeconomic, needs, starting quite formally with labor’s need to make, and then to take action to realize, valuations arrived at through reflective—not already conceptually determined—judgments.

Humming just beneath this analysis is something about exchange value, commodity form, and *conceptualization* that might otherwise go unheard. Economic modernity until his moment, Marx argues, has largely involved the emancipation of exchange value, which has made central not just this concept and practice—exchange value—but also the socioeconomic takeoff or initial triumph of determinate conceptualization itself. For the first time in history, Marx emphasizes, neither an unpredictable (because particular) individual use nor an unpredictable (because powerfully arbitrary) feudal or authoritarian diktat or set of directives, but rather a single predetermined conceptual operation—the abstraction of labor time (predictable in its operational formula if not in the yield of its case-by-case data)—has a major, if not the major say in determining socioeconomic value. This holds enormously generative possibilities for socioeconomic productive capacity; but aside—or flowing—from the new mode of production’s tendency, in an era of emancipatory and egalitarian discourse, greatly to expand the social character of production and amount of goods produced while simultaneously intensifying the disparities of wealth and resource-distribution, comes too an increasing disappearance (related to if not wholly caused by the disappearance of use as a determinant of value) of particularity. This loss-of-particularity theme, already developed by Marx and Engels, famously becomes in Benjamin’s and then Adorno’s writings “the crisis of experience,” wherein subjectivity, reflective judgment, and critical agency confront a felt evisceration of the capacity for the provisionally spontaneous, not-already-conceptually-determined experience presupposed in the ability to project more than mechanistic relations between the individual and the collective, the particular and the potentially universal. Furthermore, because of the close if not synonymous relationship between conceptual abstraction and exchange-value abstraction (in which the latter and its embodiment in commodity-form appear as the apotheosis of conceptuality and conceptual determinacy themselves), and then given that language is deemed (certainly by Marx and Engels and then the Frankfurters) the medium for significantly communicable conceptuality, there is already in Marx and Engels the noteworthy intensification of a high romantic theme (rooted deeper still in classical poetics and aesthetics): lyric poetry bears a special, radical relationship to conceptuality as such and, in modernity, to determinate
conceptuality’s socioeconomic identity as exchange-value and the commodity.

Romantic art and theory already thus begin to take as subject matter modernity’s problematic apotheosis of determinate conceptuality—and the turn, with Baudelaire, from Romanticism towards what will become modernism itself likewise indicates that both its apotheoses of natural beauty and its tortured explorations of the dangers of infernal, experience-denying modern determinism register an abiding threat in contemporary reality: the non-experience of human beings for whom judgment is by definition becoming—by the very definition of exchange value and the commodity—an already conceptualized, predetermined affair external to them and to any version of their subjectivity that would imply the importance of their capacity for reflective judgment and critical agency. Romanticism and its modernist successors consequently begin to wager about whether, starting if not concluding with sheerly formal artistic-aesthetic dynamics, a significant modern lyric poetry can emerge just when the experiential preconditions for it are starting to seem like they have gone missing—and the modern poets likewise start wagering that such a poetry might have to inculcate critique of socioeconomic modernity’s concept of concepts, the superconcept exchange value. For would not such artistic-aesthetic activity likewise constitute, enable, or begin to enact a sensed recognition of renewed possibilities for conceptually undetermined experience and judgment?

Art or semblance, the argument goes, is critical precisely in its formal character of aesthetic illusion, as opposed to unknowing aestheticist delusion. In marking itself as illusion (as the form rather than substance of conceptuality, as the Kantian generative “misattribution” to or “misrecognition” of “as-if” objectivity to subjective judgment-experience), in advertising its illusion-character to its audience, art signals the interaction and interdependence of, but also the difference between, itself and the world (whereas aestheticist delusion tends toward the collapse of the different identities—at times under the pressure of good-faith, radically-intended assumptions of responsibility for sociopolitical or ethical engagement, for changing the world—and aestheticist delusion can thus contribute unwittingly toward an inability to distinguish between artwork and world). Critical aesthetic illusion pivots on a formal dynamic or dialectic of, to paraphrase Benjamin, charged distance: the artist’s, artwork’s, and audience’s intense engagement and correspondence with—amidst an awareness of difference from—the empirical, sociohistorical and political, Real.

The audience that participates in the semblance-character at the core of Kantian-Romantic, and often Kantian-modernist, aesthetics and poetics on the one hand provisionally treats the semblance, the artwork or our aesthetic experience of it, as if it were real or had the dignity of the real—or, what
amounts to the same thing, the audience judges it as such and feels it can cognitively make such a judgment, that it can experience or know the feeling of this judging agency. On the other hand and virtually at the same moment, the audience also knows—indeed, dynamic, constructivist semblance demands that the audience know—that this is only an as-if, fiction-generated experience, because, despite the real subjective feelings of agency engendered, nothing, or at least nothing much, has yet been done to the empirical world. In other words, semblance-character’s formal, protocritical dynamic constructs the true fiction whereby one feels the capacity for cognizing, and then for acting on and changing, the world, while, at the same time, aesthetic semblance-character negatively, in its anti-aestheticist vocation, reminds the subject that however much it might seem or feel otherwise, this capacity has yet to be practically applied and realized.

In the quite explicitly Romantic-Kantian traditions of poetics and aesthetics that Marx and then the Frankfurters inherit, lyric’s special role derives not from its being better, nobler, or more right on than other kinds of literature, art, or cultural works, but from the otherwise almost unremarkable fact that, as a formal matter, lyric maintains a special relationship to the presumptive medium for significantly communicable conceptuality: language. Each art has its own unique character; lyric’s is to take language, the presumably bottom-line medium of objectivity (in the Frankfurters’ and others’ philosophical-theoretical vocabulary for the attempt to cognize reality, of conceptuality) and, first, to subjectivize it, affectively to stretch conceptuality’s bounds in order to make something that seems formally like a concept but that does something that ordinary, “objective” concepts generally do not do: sing. For lyric song to reach and give pleasure to a significant audience, it must then construct its own form of objectivity or coherence, though the logic is that of art—here especially involving poetic art’s relationship to musicality—rather than strictly mathematical-conceptual logic. Each of the arts has its mode or modes of semblance. In lyric, semblance primarily involves making speech acts appear, feel, as if their very logic has compelled them somehow to burst—naturally, justifiably, as it were—into song, which suddenly seems necessary but certainly had not yet felt predetermined, and which in its bursting (in a manner inseparable from pleasure) the formal contours of extant conceptuality, allows for a renewed sense of capacity or agency vis-à-vis materials that can eventually be grasped as reconceived or newly-conceived sociopolitical, historical, and/or ethical content within the newly-stretched form or formal capacity.

In ways that the Romantics anticipate, twentieth-century Left modernist and avant-gardist artists and critics will theorize that the age of art’s technological reproducibility (“mechanical reproduction”) is characterized not by the aesthetic aura (or semblance character, illusion character, appearance character [Scheincharakter]) that operates through charged
distance, suspension, or negation. Rather it operates by the commodity form’s version of aura or semblance, wherein a privileged concept—the superconcept called exchange value—pretends (by means of what Benjamin initially and influentially thinks of as phony aura) that it is not an already determined and determining concept, that its particular instantiations are free, are not predetermined and subsumed under this concept-practice that presumes to have already conceptualized the way to arrive at the value of anything and everything socioeconomically significant. Commodity aura is thus the photo-negative of aesthetic aura’s (and, especially relevant to conceptuality because of its linguistic character, lyric aura’s) genuinely distanced-yet-charged (because generally openly acknowledged) semblance character; this specially-charged distance of recognized or admitted aesthetic semblance is to be grasped as a critical (though only formal) negation, a provisional negation or suspension emerging from the process in which aesthetic thought-experience phenomenally takes the form of conceptual thought—though it takes only the form, and is thus only the semblance, of a determinant, substantive-objective concept.

The commodity, on the other hand, attempts positively to sell or serve up auratic luminosity as genuine, free immediacy, and the commodity does not wish to admit that its seeming freedom from conceptual determination is illusory. That is, commodity form does not present aura, illusion, in or as charged distance; hence commodity-form does not really proffer its aura through the aesthetic’s thought-and-felt as-if, where semblance is simultaneously engaged as if it were reality, while also being marked consciously as mere aesthetic semblance, inherently distant from reality. Rather, the commodity presents aura through aestheticization (where the audience is meant to lose sight of the status or character of illusion, and thus to have the illusion meld in identity and immediacy with reality), and the commodity does this in lockstep with aestheticization’s march towards its own logical endpoint: the collapse into pure immediacy of the as-if’s constitutive tension of charged distance, so that semblance or illusion is no longer critically, simultaneously enjoyed and also recognized as illusion but instead now produces the delusion of literal, immediate, particularized presence that supposedly never was illusion, or that has somehow left illusion, semblance, mimesis and judgment-play behind. This collapse, of charged aesthetic illusion into delusion, leads to or is itself the concomitant collapse of the experiential preconditions for reflective judgment and critical agency.

In sum, its offering of a seeming, apparent, merely formal or semblance-version of substantive-objective conceptuality is what makes the aesthetic effectively quasiconceptual. Presented to the subject himself or herself as if it were a logical substantive-objective concept, but actually characterized by a fundamentally affective experience of conceptuality (feeling rather than
intellectually understanding what appears to be objective, what appears to be, what is the semblance or illusion of, an objective concept), precisely this aesthetic experience or Kantian quasiconceptuality permits and can even propel the eventual expansion of objective conceptuality. For its mere semblance-character, its mere formal, mimetic activity rather than any genuinely substantive instantiation of an extant concept, is exactly what allows aesthetic thought-experience to avoid determination by that extant (and therefore substantive, “objective”) concept. The semblance-character of art and aesthetic experience underwrites their relative lack of responsibility to—their relative freedom from determination by—already established concepts. This does not mean freedom from the sociohistorical or political; it means freedom from determination by extant governing (or, for that matter, extant oppositional) concepts of the sociohistorical or political. (The difference between the two—between sociohistorical/political determination and conceptual determination—has consistently been collapsed in variants of Marxian, neo-Marxian, and post-Marxian Left critique. But the difference is what makes Marx possible—what makes a human subject, conditioned by the sociohistorical and subjected to reigning concepts and ideologies, nonetheless capable of thinking through and past existing concepts and ideologies—in the first place).

Semblance-character’s freedom from substantive conceptual domination permits the aesthetic’s inherently experimental stretching—its stretching past those already known, determined and determining concepts that it is not bound by—to feel not like dutiful work but rather, to a highly significant degree, like play. Since by definition aesthetic thought-experience has only the form, only the semblance, of objective, content-filled conceptuality, aesthetic work with conceptual form literally becomes play-work, the mere form or semblance of conceptually-determined intellectual operations: from the affective get-go, one plays around with, and is free to recombine, stretch, or extend the conceptual materials, in ways not usually sanctioned where an already-determined conceptual content necessarily delimits the acceptable range of results. All of which points towards the reasons that for classic Left and Marxian artists and critics, a kind of art and aesthetic experience distinct from aestheticization but also from thematized political interventionism is highly, maybe even supremely, valued; it is valued for its ability to provide a provisional, formal suspension or negation of extant ruling concepts, and thus for its ability to stimulate the type of imaginative and affective experience that can allow for the emergence, into the field of perception, of those materials that can in turn eventually provide a basis for the postaesthetic construction of new concepts and the new social dispensations that would correspond to them.

And one thus could perhaps not too strongly insist that what lyric semblance and other kinds of artistic semblance effect, in their semblance-
character, is protocritical illusion: their aesthetic as if announces and identifies itself as illusion or semblance, so that both the semblance, and the reality it relates to but differs from, are simultaneously registered. Again this aesthetic experience is to be distinguished from aestheticization, where illusion and reality are not simultaneously registered but collapsed, so that what was once aesthetic illusion, now no longer asking to be seen in tandem with the reality it differs from, ceases to be the critical or protocritical phenomenon of aesthetic illusion and instead becomes the sociopolitical or ethical delusion that art or criticism has already counted as, or towards, real-world commitment or engagement, has already counted as an action in and on the world, as change rather than interpretation or the agency-inculcating sense of aesthetic engagement. From Romanticism onward, and especially in twentieth-century experimentalism, what advanced art, criticism, and, especially, lyric continuously re-make and rediscover is how art (poetry above all) discovers critical (not consolatory or redemptive but probing) formal means to wrest a sense of aura from aura’s absence; it discovers how to particularize particularity’s disappearance, how to invest the seeming unavailability of reflective experience with the charge and force of reflective experience (so that one might be enabled to reflect, for starters, on what it means to appear to have lost reflective capacity itself). In short, experimental modern poetry discovers how—in, as, lyric (and therefore suffused with lyric’s history of constructing-presenting the semblance of a singular, particularized voice that, emerging from play with language’s ostensibly determined-objective-universal character, offers the possibility of others’ hearing that voice as theirs and their voices as the poem’s)—to sing song’s impossibility.

But all that takes much too long to say, and it is not all that pleasurable; far more efficient, arresting, and plain delightful—plain creationist!—to get the point across by having your golondrina become the golonfina, golonclima, golonrima, and to have such a bird-rima bring you—presently, yet in a way that just a few moments before would literally not have been happening, and so could only have been a possible future—to a golonrisa. Yes, creacionismo was a movement of one, but a movement of one intended—and successfully executed to become, as it did—one and one and one and one, millions of times over. Left-critique decrying, in Marx’s name, the particularism or aesthetic individualism of Huidobro’s and kindred poetics, has frequently missed, in terribly unintended irony, precisely what Marx was getting at in the hopeful moments not only of Das Kapital, and not only in Marx’s unstinting praise of the revolutionary formal innovations (and the right, as poet, to be a “strange fish!”) of Dante, Milton, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Goethe, Shelley, and Heine, but likewise in the earlier text obviously underwriting so much of the present essay, the Theses on Feuerbach (which, rather than insisting that theory or philosophy be
integrated with change, rather more brilliantly critiques the very idealist insistence on, and category-mistake of, their unification, a unification that is aestheticization itself). The belatedness that still characterizes U.S. poetry’s muted and muting relationship to Huidobro has begun to have the unexpected side-benefit of coinciding with a burgeoning international awareness, not so much new as re-discovered, about how to know Huidobro’s futurity as a present being made and re-made now, not in the mistaken, deluded belief that extant society has thus been made into a golonclima, but that, having sensed our imaginative capacity for critical agency, we can know we might indeed have the ability to alter, modify, or transform this and that—and to do decide to act on that sense of capacity.

Note


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