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by

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Agendas of Translation: Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot and Allen Tate in *Orígenes: Revista  
de arte y literatura* (1944-56)

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Agendas of Translation: Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot and Allen Tate in *Orígenes: Revista*

*de arte y literatura* (1944-56)

by

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Agendas of Translation: Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot and Allen Tate in *Orígenes: Revista de arte y literatura* (1944-56)

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Robert St. Clair Lesman, Ph.D.  
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This study examines the textual dialogues that emerge from the translation and publication of texts by U.S. authors in the Cuban literary magazine *Orígenes: Revista de Arte y Literatura*. The magazine, published in Havana from 1944 to 1956, is considered one of the most important in the history of Latin American literature. This dissertation analyzes the aesthetic, philosophical, political and religious foundations of texts by Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, and Allen Tate in this new context, rather than from within the framework of the U.S. literary canon. It is thus possible to illuminate the explicit and implicit cultural dialogues that emerge from the interactions between texts of distinct cultural origins. This methodology is aimed at offering insights into the nature of cultural production in an international context and at expanding our understanding of the

connections between two national cultures that have been kept artificially separate by an embargo for the past four decades.

The text begins with the description of a methodology for studying literary journals and the function of translation within them. Then, *Orígenes* is placed in its historical, cultural and political context, and the thinking of each Cuban participant is described, illustrating how each writer contributes in a unique way to the overarching cultural projects of the magazine.

The study then examines the textual interactions between each U. S. author and *Orígenes*, illustrating how each interaction contributes to a dialogue on themes of realism, history, imperialism, temporality, mysticism, technology, and exoticism. In narrating each textual dialogue, the study is attentive not only to the conceptual consonances and dissonances that emerge, but also to the crucial mechanics of textual transfer through translation.

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## **Introduction**

*Orígenes: Revista de arte y literatura* (1944-56) is one of the most significant and influential literary magazines in the history of Latin American literature. Participants, rivals, and subsequent generations of critics have all concurred that the journal sustained an unusually high level of artistic quality through the twelve years of its publication. Not only did it publish work by some of the most important Latin American authors of the moment, but also presented, in translation, the texts of some of the most significant European and North American writers. Among the Europeans represented were Paul Claudel, Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Valéry, Stephen Spender and Juan Ramón Jiménez. The North American writers included were Elizabeth Bishop, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Fowlie, Caroline Gordon, Henry James, Harry Levin, Francis Otto Matthiessen, Katherine Anne Porter, George Santayana, Wallace Stevens, Allen Tate, and William Carlos Williams. Though it might be argued that the inclusion of such texts was meant simply to boost the publication's prestige, the editors and other participants in the magazine, as well as subsequent groups of critics all assert that the international character of the magazine is central to its substance. This study is based on this assertion, seeking to suggest a detailed explanation of its implications.

This study deals with the Cuba-United States axis of collaboration at work in *Orígenes*. I examine the texts that Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot and Allen Tate contributed to the magazine, considering those texts in a transnational context. The aesthetic, philosophical, political and religious values embedded in those texts will be considered in relation to the stated and unstated cultural agendas of the *Orígenes* group, in a critical perspective that treats the texts as evidence of contentious encounters

between differing or parallel notions of the character and importance of literary expression.

I choose these three authors from among the U.S.-born authors represented because the publication of their work in *Orígenes* creates dialogues of the greatest conceptual breadth and depth. Focusing on these authors allows this study to illustrate three very different transnational textual encounters and explore their significant implications within the limited scope of this study. Further, each encounter is characterized by a predominant mode of interaction, each of which is central to an understanding of the *Orígenes* project. The Stevens nexus is primarily aesthetic, the Tate nexus is political, and the Eliot nexus deals primarily with issues of religion. Thus, using these three authors as case studies allows for a focused exploration of each of these three textual dynamics.

The way in which I have structured the terms of the comparisons I will make in this study already suggests a significant methodological problem: how can one characterize in a coherent way what the cultural agendas of a magazine like *Orígenes* were? The *origenistas*, the group of regular contributors to the magazine and participants in its legendary dinners and discussion circles, consist of authors of varying aesthetic, philosophical and religious orientations. Thus the implications of the publication of a certain U.S. author's text and the particular nature of its translation into Spanish cannot be said to arise from a simple one-to-one interaction between foreign text and a monolithic Cuban culture or aesthetics. Each foreign text finds itself situated in a heterogeneous cultural terrain that *Orígenes* maps out, one that can present both similarities and contrasts to the techniques and intentions of the U.S. authors.

The most prolific and imposing figure of the group is José Lezama Lima (1910-1976), whose poetics informs the central theoretical current of *origenismo*. His programmatic essays claim the largest discursive territory in the magazine, and his numerous poems and fiction pieces constitute an imposing body of creative practice that manifests the theory of his essays. It is nonetheless a mistake to reduce *Orígenes* to Lezama, examining how multiple authors offer their individual takes on his central poetic doctrine. As we will see, Cintio Vitier, Virgilio Piñera and José Rodríguez Feo, each in his own way, represents a unique stream of thought within *Orígenes*. Piñera stands out as a radical foil to Lezama's poetics, with his assertion of the categories of the absurd and the grotesque, in his atheism, and his profoundly pessimistic vision of human existence. Cintio Vitier is less obviously opposed to Lezama, though the religious foundations of his poetics are quite different. Finally, Rodríguez Feo, the one who coordinates and mediates most of the transnational textual encounters in the magazine, is a complex thinker, who both bolsters and challenges Lezama's ideas about art in his translations and essays. He figures prominently in this study.

Rodríguez Feo's editing, translations, and critical work show him to be a liminal and protean figure. At times he sings in unison with Lezama (as in the essays signed by both editors) and in other instances introduces methodologies and philosophical assertions that inflect the agenda expressed in those essays in new ways. The best way of describing Rodríguez Feo's role in *Orígenes* is to call it *translational*. His labors embody two opposing theoretical implications of the activity of translation. His efforts as editor, translator and literary critic open a space of fusion, where the foreign text and its receiving context are reconciled with one another and the transfer of meanings is

facilitated, while at the same time illustrating moments of incompatibility or blockage in the transfer between original and target languages and cultures.

The unity of *Orígenes* as a cultural project survived for ten years and forty issues, until the split in 1954 between Lezama and Rodríguez Feo. Along with Virgilio Piñera and others, Rodríguez Feo founded *Ciclón* (1955-59), a magazine that returned to some of the fundamental concerns and techniques of the European-influenced *vanguardistas*. This often-discussed event does not represent a sudden divergence between the two editors of the magazine, but rather represents the culmination of the gradual development of a distinct poetics within *Orígenes*. *Ciclón* represents a later consolidation of an internal aesthetic counterpoint to the stylistic and thematic concerns that many readers associate with *Orígenes*.<sup>1</sup> Thus the definition of the *Orígenes* project will need to specify the dissonances that inflect its harmonic voicings in order to stay true to the essential heterogeneity operating within the magazine's broader consensus.

The core impulse of the journal, beneath the variegated texture of conflict within the group, is to propose a variety of artistic responses to the deterioration of public institutions in the face of corruption and the imperialism that fosters it. These responses delve into the spiritual and philosophical foundations of artistic creation itself, rather than engage political corruption on its own discursive level, which would diminish their power to present a coherent and effective alternative. If the means of organizing human effort in political and commercial spheres in Cuba in the 1940s and 1950s impoverish and degrade the many for the benefit of the few, then in response, the *origenistas* propose a wholly different model that channels discrete creative energies into a collective expression that works to validate and uplift each participating individual. The belief in the inherent

potential for spiritual regeneration in artistic activity unites much of the group, though we will see that the theologies undergirding that belief are multiple. Differences of approach and technique within the group do not threaten this model of unity, but rather uphold it, by manifesting the value of counterpoint within the creative chorality of *origenismo*.

Thus, variations in philosophical interest and formal tendency within the group do not necessarily undermine the *Orígenes* project because that project advocates a kind of creative democracy in its programmatic statements. This democracy situates itself in firm opposition to the corruption of democracy in the public sphere, through the concrete degradations of the representative process and through the hegemonic ideological unities thrust upon the many by a corrupt Cuban plutocracy. At the highly significant moment of the magazine's split into two manifestations in 1954, Lezama asserts that the very "origins" of the magazine depended on "...the mysterious unity of its poetic form, the ... forced concurrence..."<sup>2</sup> of its multiple creative channels ("...misteriosa unidad de su forma poética, la ... esforzada concurrencia...") (Diez Años 65).<sup>3</sup> The entire notion of the magazine's cultural agenda thus must be characterized by the productive tension between harmony and dissonance. What the history of *Orígenes* illustrates is that it is extremely difficult to maintain such a conflicted state of affairs before a natural splintering occurs.

As Lezama asserts, within the space opened by a permissive heterogeneity, a certain degree of consistency of mission must be operative for the particularities of each writer's work to stand out. A set of common concerns, and even approaches, is necessary for the individuality of each work to enter into dialogue with its counterparts. Thus, I will attempt at each stage of my analysis to take into account both the underlying unity

and the significant discrepancies within the *Orígenes* project, marking multiple points of contact and interaction between the U.S. and Cuban literary productions, rather than encounters between monolithic cultural phenomena. In doing so, I hope to illustrate the democratic notion of creative activity that informs the magazine's agendas and that propels its mission of constructing a cultural microcosm of a just society to oppose a corrupt one.

The politics of resistance and renewal implicit in the aesthetics of *Orígenes* makes for a particularly contentious zone of encounter between the journal and its North American contributors. In the context of the interactions between Cuban and North American texts, we must recognize that the corruption that *Orígenes* explicitly opposes is fostered by Cuba's neocolonial relationship to the United States. The problem arises of how to treat the moments of interaction between Cuban and U.S. cultural actors within the overarching context of neocolonial political, economic and political relationships. It is indeed important to recognize the unique political implications of textual discussions of issues like imperialism and the proper role of literature in a society when they take place across a boundary defined by a relationship of economic exploitation. Nonetheless, an awareness of the importance of the unequal geopolitical terms on which such cultural encounters take place should not lead inevitably to a schematization of textual interactions according to those terms.

Instead, this study treats the participants from both countries as equals. Differences of agenda or theoretical orientation between these North Americans and the *origenistas* cannot always be described in terms of geopolitical power relations. Rather than enabling cultural exploitation, the kind of cultural space opened by the collaboration

of U.S. and Cuban authors facilitates implicit and explicit dialogues on the nature of literary art and its importance to the development of culture. This space is one in which geopolitical power is only one kind of advantage, whereas the power to define the crucial terms of the exchange is more equally shared, and at times shifts to the side of the Cuban authors who set the terms of debate within the pages of their magazine. Just as the nature of the *origenistas*' collective goals cannot be schematized into a distorting unity, the political implications of each textual encounter between U.S. and Cuban cultural productions cannot be simplified according to a reductive geopolitical dynamic.

### **Translation in *Orígenes*: A Statement of Methodology**

Any analysis of the mechanisms and effects of translation must begin with the assumptions Maria Tymoczko outlines in her essay on translation and postcolonial writing: "It is abundantly clear from the theory and practice of translation that no text can ever be fully translated in all its aspects: perfect homology is impossible between translation and source. Choices must be made by the translator; there are additions and omissions in the process, no matter how skilled the translator" (23). When we discuss translations of English texts for publication in *Orígenes*, we must assume that each one will include these additions and omissions. Furthermore, the rendering of certain crucial words and phrases will enact refractions of the original sense, generating aesthetic, political, religious and philosophical implications not present in the original.

As Lawrence Venuti explains in his introduction to *The Translation Studies Reader*, translation theories revolve around two conceptual poles: equivalence and function. Equivalence is understood as the translation's accuracy or faithfulness to the

original, a concept used to evaluate how closely the two texts correspond on a linguistic level. As Tymoczko asserts, we might encounter broad zones of equivalence between original and translation, but they will never be complete in scope.

Function, on the other hand, is "...the potentiality of the translated text to release diverse effects..." (5). When we evaluate the function of a translation, we are interested in its interactions with the target cultural context rather than in the clarity of its reflection of the linguistic character of the original. We ask what the original *does* in (or to) its language system and the culture in which that system operates and then ask the same question about the translation. To understand a text's function, we must first gain a general understanding of the political, aesthetic, religious and commercial contexts of the text's production and then move to an analysis of how the text is designed to interact with those contexts. The nature of this interaction can be alternately cooperative or combative. Works can seek to strengthen, enrich, inflect or defend certain features of their dominant context while works characterized as subversive, avant-garde, blasphemous or anticommercial are clearly posed in a conflictive relation to certain contextual structures. A single text usually is engaged in both functions at the same time, employing techniques considered standard within one contextual frame while deploying subversive effects within another.

Moving beyond the level of semantic or syntactic equivalence, the concept of function operates on a broader level of cultural meaning, though it never escapes its grounding in the semantic and grammatical features of a text. It does not negate equivalence as a valid criterion of analysis, either, but rather interacts with and revises our understanding of the nature of equivalence. Equivalence and function, in fact, must



be understood as working in conjunction with one another in any instance of translation theory or practice. Any analysis of a translation must employ both concepts. Function should be understood not as a concept that breaks away from equivalence, but rather as that aspect of a translation that negotiates different levels of significance, engaging some and marginalizing others.

In examining the translations that enable the textual transfers between Cuban and U.S. literatures, we will see these kinds of adjustments and negotiations at work. For the purposes of this study, though, we must be attentive to instances where a translation possesses functions that do not harmonize into the kind of metatextual equivalence Venuti describes. Rather than try to recreate a text's original effect upon its own language, literary canon, or culture, a translation can process the original in a way that produces an effect that it never possessed in its original context. In this kind of operation, equivalence is often preserved at semantic and syntactic levels, but the translation that emerges from that equivalence has a function that is completely new because the receiving context is so different from the original context.

At other times, we see a translation breaking away from linguistic equivalence to release an effect that does not contribute to an equivalence of function either. This kind of translational move treats the text quite differently than those that sacrifice linguistic equivalence in order to offer the reader a more broadly cognate experience of the text. In this case, the translation is a more thoroughgoing manipulation of the text; it is mobilized to contribute to certain cultural projects in the target culture in a way that has no equivalent in the operations of the text in its original context. When the translator operates in this way, she does not strive to simply offer readers who are not conversant

with the language of the original an experience of the original text's effects, but rather prepares the original for a wholly new function in the target context. If what Venuti describes is what I would call an *analytical* approach to translation, where the goal is to present an understanding of a crucial function of the original to a new audience, this other mode of translation is an *activist* one. This kind of translator is more interested in how a foreign text can be used than in how one should replicate its function in the target language.

To understand this mode of translation, we must view translation as "...one of the processes of literary manipulation, whereby texts are rewritten across linguistic boundaries and that rewriting takes place in a very clearly inscribed cultural and historical context," as Susan Bassnett-McGuire explains (xvii). There are two crucial assertions in this statement. The first is that translation is a *manipulation*, rather than a passive mirroring, of the original. All translators make interventions into texts. This fact illustrates what Bassnett-McGuire calls the "independence" of the translator from the discursive constraints involved in the production of the original (82).

The second assertion helps us know how to make sense of these interventions—they are part of an intercultural encounter at a given moment in cultural history. Accepting this second assertion, it becomes clear that to criticize or lament alterations made to the original, without asking the question of what purpose and what meaning those alterations have in the dynamic of cultural transfer, is inadequate to the task of describing the full implications of what occurs in a translation. Whether we believe they are intentional or not, violations of our basic notions of equivalence between source text and translation participate integrally in processing the source text so that specific

aesthetic, political, religious or philosophical functions can be deployed in the target cultural context. Presenting a text to a foreign audience in a clear, unmediated way, so that the audience's experience of the text is a re-enactment of the experience of the readers of the original, is impossible. Every translation is a rewriting, where the translator tackles the same essential question that the original author does: how to make a text speak to a certain cultural context.

André Lefevere provides a useful way of understanding the cultural context to which both the original and the translation respond by breaking it down into two fundamental and interrelated systems—poetics and ideology. The first is a set of beliefs about the proper aesthetic and formal traits of a work. The second is a set of normative statements about how a society should function (14). This second group of assertions tackles questions such as the proper means of political organization, economic stratification, and the relevance of religious meanings in the definition of a society. Contained within the poetics is the totality of images, devices and generic definitions available to a writer working within the system (26). But there is also a mode of poetics that centers on the relation of that of these aesthetic elements to ideology. This mode coordinates literary and cultural-political concerns, deploying a set of operative assertions about the relevance of literature within the broader system of shared social meanings (26).

Lefevere states that two groups regulate which statements about the role of literature in society are true and which are false. The first is the professionals within the literary system: the editors, critics, teachers and translators (14). This group not only judges the value of a literary work, but also decides what works will be disseminated

throughout the culture. Editors accept and reject manuscripts for publication, and publishing houses control how many copies and editions to disseminate. Critics influence this process through their judgments, and teachers also influence this process, as the required readings on their syllabi collectively affect the demand for certain texts. Translators contribute to the determination of a work's value and relevance by the choice of a text for translation, and control how a new audience will perceive that value and relevance by the mechanisms of their translation.

The second group is the “patrons,” who affect the operations of literary meaning in relation to broader cultural meaning when they “further or hinder the reading, writing, and rewriting of literature” (15). The most obvious patrons—publishing companies, universities, political parties or movements, the media—manipulate the demand for literary works from outside the literary system. They do so through various apparatuses of broad-scale communication and influence, with clear political, social and economic ends always in mind. Though there are actors who bridge the definitions of professionals and patrons, Lefevere's distinction of these two roles is useful.

For our study of the acts of rewriting that incorporate U.S. texts into *Orígenes*, the “professionals” will receive more focus than the “patrons,” for various reasons. First, the magazine is funded almost entirely by the personal funds of coeditor José Rodríguez Feo, removing economic pressures from consideration. Second, the magazine assumes, as an explicit project, the rejection of any kind of “coordination” (to use Lefevere's concept) between its literary agenda and the agenda of any political party, a project made feasible by the luxury of being funded by one of its editors. Finally, the magazine is wholly

uninterested in reaching any kind of mass appeal, and thus feels no obligation to follow the rules of the marketplace (again, a function of its financial independence).

*Orígenes* is for these reasons a project shaped and produced by actors within Cuban literary culture, with the aim of reaching and influencing other literary professionals in addition to a very small contingent of elite, highly-educated non-professional readers. Thus, the means by which the rewriting of literary texts is carried out and the meanings that subsequently emerge and interact with their Cuban context are predominantly controlled by the editors, translators, and central authors of the *Orígenes* group. The journal sets its own cultural agenda and carries out all processes of production, including translation, with that self-determined agenda as the primary operative principle.

This is not to assert that the *origenista* project, because of its independence from political and commercial forces of influence, insulates itself from political issues. *Orígenes* expresses its own political and cultural ideologies, in response to prevailing ideologies advanced through institutional structures of power in Cuba. The journal struggles, in its own eccentric way, to instantiate its vision of the proper structure of Cuban society. It is not, by virtue of its independence, isolated from the ideologies by which systems of patronage operate. Instead, the journal is constantly in dialogue with ideologies external to its self-regulated literary and ideological system, even though it is able to carry out that dialogue in whatever ways it chooses because of its financial self-sufficiency.

For these reasons, the analyses in this study will always consider the “professional” context of the explicit *Orígenes* agendas as the most immediate context in

which to make sense of the operations of rewriting in the journal. To do so is to respect the reality of the elite and independent nature of the journal's position in Cuban society. The dialogue of the journal with national cultural formations will be considered second, and only after making the primary contextual relevance clear. Thus, one of the goals of this study will be to avoid treacherous leaps from textual to generalized cultural "realities." The manipulation of a concept or technique employed by a translation will not be said to "represent" some aspect of a historical Cuban "experience," without first ascertaining how that act of manipulation responds to the specific poetic and ideological mechanisms of the magazine and its producers.

### **Chapter Introductions**

In the first chapter, I will offer a summary of the essential cultural agendas of *Orígenes*, in order to establish an understanding of the conceptual context into which North American texts are incorporated. The central issues around which *Orígenes* organizes itself are: its relation to the previous generation of Cuban and Latin American writers, its assertion of the regenerative power of literary art, the role of religion in the definition of the journal's aesthetics and *ethos*, and the role of translation as a method of inflecting and enriching the cultural force of the journal.

In the second chapter, I will consider the most documented point of contact between U.S. authors and *Orígenes*: the publication of poems by Wallace Stevens in the magazine. Taking into account these texts, their translations, and the extensive correspondence between the North American and José Rodríguez Feo, I will attempt to adjust the terms of discussion about Stevens's role in *Orígenes*. I will try to show that

Stevens's stance toward the magazine was not a colonialist one, and that his interest in the authenticity of Cuban cultural production is not an instance of the exoticist gaze.

Rodríguez Feo's translation of Stevens's poem "Attempt to Discover Life" lies at the center of this argument, as it illustrates a unique instance of textual dialogue in which the North American poet submits more of a template than a finished work, so that the Cuban translator might create a new poem. This instance shows Stevens's reluctance to force the imprint of his own literary fame upon the magazine and his interest in cross-cultural interactions that fostered the creativity of both participants. In the dialogue that Rodríguez Feo and Stevens sustain, we will encounter debates on the question of the realist and the imaginative impulses in art, on the proper sources for literary production, and on the task of sustaining a rigorous personal methodology for creation.

In the third chapter, I will consider two of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, "Burnt Norton" and "East Coker," focusing especially on the concepts of time, memory and history they express and elucidating the resonances and dissonances with the different religious and philosophical perspectives on these topics expressed in *Orígenes*. I will show how Eliot's poems interact in a different way with Lezama's and with Vitier's work, respectively, and subsequently analyze the refractions that Rodríguez Feo's translations impose on the poems. We will see that these refractions are motivated by a particular conception of the Catholic character of *Orígenes* that contrasts with perceived Protestant cultural traits in Eliot's work. The mysticism of St. John of the Cross will be a fundamental intertext in this encounter.

In the fourth chapter, I will consider the surprising presence of Allen Tate's essay "The New Provincialism" in *Orígenes*. I will show how his essay is a peculiar instance

of anti-imperialist rhetoric that incorporates a prescient critique of the cultural implications of globalism. I will then consider how Tate's critique of the colonialism of the American North clashes with the dominant methodology of cultural discourse in *Orígenes*. Establishing the terms of this conflict, I will go on to show that Tate's essay supplies a perspective on imperialism that supplements *Orígenes'* cultural anti-imperialism. Rodolfo Tro's translation of the text stays true to the essential anti-imperialist program of the original, though it de-emphasizes much of the text's cultural specificity and emphasizes the notion of religion's importance in resisting the degradations of modernity.



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## Notes to Introduction

<sup>1</sup> As Abel Prieto notes, “...coexiste, dentro del propio seno de este movimiento, un Orígenes y un anti-Orígenes, o lo que también se ha denominado, un poco esquema y metafísicamente, como dos tradiciones: la del sí y la del no” (9) (“...there coexists, at the core of the movement, an Orígenes and an anti-Orígenes, or what has been called, somewhat schematically and metaphysically, something like two traditions: one of the “yes” and one of the “no”). Whereas the mainstream of the *Orígenes* agenda is essentially optimistic and affirmative in philosophy, there was, from the start, a darker and more pessimistic strain of thought that fully manifested itself in *Ciclón*. The later magazine can be read as a reaction against *Orígenes*’ rejection of the vanguardist *revista de avance*, though Rodríguez-Feo was not interested in rehashing old literary fads. The philosophical interest in the absurd that characterized *Ciclón* resonates with the pervasive influence that surrealism held over Cuban literature specifically, and Latin American literature generally, from the 1920s through the 1940s.

<sup>2</sup> All translations from the Spanish in this study are my own. Excellent translations of crucial texts from both *Orígenes* and *Ciclón* can be found in the special issue of *New Centennial Review* edited by Salah Hassan.

<sup>3</sup> It is of course ironic that Lezama asserts the necessity of this unity at the moment of its failure. The split between Lezama and Rodríguez Feo was a rancorous

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one. In this context, the accent in his phrase falls on the modifier “forced,” suggesting a cohesion that could not be maintained forever, despite its temporary success.

## Chapter One

### *Orígenes*: Contributors and Development

*Orígenes: Revista de Arte y Literatura* was published in Havana from 1944 to 1956.<sup>1</sup> The group of regular contributors consisted of authors whose principal occupation was poetry: José Lezama Lima (1910-76), Ángel Gaztelu (1914-2003), Gastón Baquero (1914-1997), Eliseo Diego (1920-1994), Octavio Smith (1921-1987), Cintio Vitier (1921), Fina García Marruz (1923), and Lorenzo García Vega (1926). Virgilio Piñera (1912-79), a writer of immense talent and unorthodox methods, emerged as a poet, though later came to be better known for his plays. The artist Mariano Rodríguez (1912-1990) contributed significantly to *Orígenes*, which engaged in sympathetic dialogue with the visual arts throughout its existence. Finally, coeditor, translator and critic José Rodríguez Feo (1920-1993), a central figure in this study, played a large role in shaping the journal's international connections.

Different combinations of members of this group produced a number of publications leading up to the appearance of *Orígenes*, which represented a culmination of earlier efforts, in terms of quality, consistency, duration. The first of these early journals was *Verbum*, which produced three numbers in 1937 under the unusual sponsorship of the National Association of Law Students at the University of Havana. The magazine was run by José Lezama Lima and René Villanorvo, and showed characteristics that anticipate *Orígenes*: a preference for a refined poetic language—almost old-fashioned for its time—that was influenced by Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez (1881-1959), an interest in the visual arts, and a Catholic aesthetic and philosophical orientation.

The six issues of *Espuela de plata* (1939-41) represented the continuation of these influences, with the addition of a broader and more international range of contributions, including the work of Bachelard, Valéry, Shelly, Joyce, Whitman, and Eliot. Lezama again was in a central role, accompanied by coeditors Guy Pérez Cisneros and the painter Mariano Rodríguez. José Prats Sariol notes that many aspects of the *Orígenes* aesthetic begin to take distinct shape in *Espuela de plata*: an emphasis on symbolism, a search for the origins of creative inspiration, and an orientation of literary production toward the value of universality rather than cultural specificity (40).

From 1942-44, Lezama and Gaztelu produced ten issues of *Nadie parecía*, whose title comes from a poem by the Spanish mystic poet St. John of the Cross. St. John and the Juan Ramón Jiménez continued to be fundamental presences in the journal's aesthetics. The five issues of *Clavileño* (1942-43), edited by Baquero, Diego and Vitier, also continued an engagement with the poetry and theology of the Spanish mystic.

Finally, it is important to mention the journal *Poeta*, which Piñera edited from 1942-43, producing only two issues. Alongside works by Baquero, Vitier and the Spanish philosopher María Zambrano, Piñera published his most important poem, "La isla en peso," and his translations of Aimé Césaire and Paul Valéry. The division between Piñera and Lezama, the architect of the dominant aesthetics of *Orígenes*, is already clear in Piñera's editorials.<sup>2</sup>

*Orígenes* emerged in 1944 as a collaboration between Lezama and Rodríguez Feo. The journal reunited the contributors to the magazines discussed above in what would turn out to be a lasting, if problematic, affiliation that produced one of Latin America's best literary journals. Rodríguez Feo's significant family wealth, derived

largely from sugarcane production, subsidized the magazine. In addition to the Cuban contributors mentioned so far, the journal published work by many other Cuban poets and critics, such Samuel Feijoo, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Eugenio Florit, Ramón Guirao, and Dulce María Loynaz. There was also a significant Mexican presence, marked by the collaborations of Carlos Fuentes, José Revueltas and Alfonso Reyes; the spring, 1947 issue of *Orígenes* was dedicated to Mexican literature and art. Spanish poets of the Generation of 1927—Vicente Aleixandre, Manuel Altolaguirre, Luis Cernuda, Jorge Guillén and Pedro Salinas—played a prominent role in the journal. In addition to his role in introducing North American writers to the pages of *Orígenes*, Rodríguez Feo translated the work of the French writers Louis Aragon, Albert Camus, René Char, Patrice de La Tour du Pin, and André Masson. Vitier translated Roger Caillois, Paul Claudel, Stéphane Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Valéry and Simone Weil.

In 1954, a personal conflict led the editors of *Orígenes* to sever ties. The journal's thirty-fifth number included a brief statement, announcing Rodríguez Feo's departure, and the continued loyalty of most *origenistas* to Lezama. Nonetheless, Rodríguez Feo produced two of his own issues of *Orígenes*, until Lezama, who had been trained as a lawyer, decided to register the magazine in his name and thus prevent his ex-colleague from continuing with his parallel versions.<sup>3</sup> Lacking the funds that Rodríguez Feo brought to the production of the journal, Lezama was forced to cease publication after the fortieth issue, in 1956.

### **The Basic Operations of Literary Magazines**

In order to discuss the significance of *Orígenes*, it is important to begin with some general considerations about the cultural functions of literary magazines, and consider those functions within a Latin American context. Literary magazines in most cultural contexts play a number of fundamental roles. They facilitate and express collective creative pursuits, and in their pages, those pursuits are publicized and defended against detractors. The manifesto and the polemic generally are given a privileged space, especially in twentieth-century European and Latin American literary magazines. Literary magazines almost always define for themselves, with varying levels of clarity and consistency, a cultural project that responds to the work of predecessors and advocates a new path for the development of art. Though it can never be uniform in its expression of a shared agenda, a literary magazine always works to define and embody a specific set of aesthetic, political, philosophical, and even religious values. These values are never a repetition of precedent; they mark either a radical detour from a previous project or a middle way, a compromise with a preceding model. A literary magazine asserts its own relevance and importance by posing itself as a rupture. The literary magazine's early statements of agenda tend toward bold promises to correct the errors of predecessors and set artistic endeavor on the right path.

Not only does the literary magazine tend to locate itself temporally in a generational progression, but it also consciously situates itself in relation to the cultural spaces of region, nation or internation. No literary magazine, in the effort to define its project and to assert its relevance, ignores the question of what cultural space it reflects, analyzes, reforms or reimagines. In the United States, a number of literary magazines have explicitly framed themselves as regional phenomena, responding to local cultural,

political and literary developments and eschewing projects of national cultural dialogue. In the United States, the Southern literary magazines *Sewanee Review* (1892-present) and *Virginia Quarterly Review* (1925-present) are examples of this kind of project. But in Latin America, the regional journal is not as prominent; literary magazines tend toward the polemical construction of a national identity. This nationalist agenda derives from the tendency of the Latin American intellectual, since the wars of independence in the nineteenth century, to forcefully assert the primacy of his role in the construction of a workable definition of national culture.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, this tendency frequently works in dynamic tension with the effort to situate the national culture at the various nexuses of international cultural exchange. Latin American intellectuals, throughout the twentieth century, are rarely able to posit their work as strictly national, intersected as Latin America is by exertions of political, economic and cultural influence from Europe and the United States. Thus, the Latin American literary magazine inevitably responds to its international context; whether it resists or embraces links with foreign cultural activity, it is always required to pose a response.

An example of this inevitable process of negotiation is the Argentine magazine *Sur* (1931-92), which occupies the same level of cultural importance and impact as *Orígenes*. The internationalism of *Sur* is evident from its origin in the interactions of its creator, Victoria Ocampo, with U.S. philosopher Waldo Frank. The journal emerged as a hybrid of Frank's belief in the importance of pan-American cultural reconciliation and Ocampo's profound connection to French language and culture.<sup>5</sup> Yet the journal expressed as its goal the analytical-creative elucidation of a total vision of Argentine

cultural identity (Sitman 75-6). This focus only seems on the surface to be bifurcated, as the aforementioned geopolitical intersections that define Latin American nationality assure that attempts to divulge the national essence will participate in internationalist discourses.

The translation of foreign texts often plays an important role in Latin American magazines' constructions of cultural projects, pointing up a recognition of, and engagement in, the processes of transnational cultural transfer discussed here. The significance of the publication of texts by important European and North American authors cannot be reduced to that of educating a readership about foreign cultural developments, nor to the goal of garnering prestige for the publication, though both of these processes might be at work in the activities of a given journal.

Instead, the incorporation of foreign texts into the local context of the literary journal is inevitably dialogic. The carefully constructed coherence of agenda expressed and evidenced in a literary journal makes it impossible to see a foreign text merely as an appendage. If the foreign text is brought into the discursive space established by the programmatic statements and editorial selections of the journal, it inevitably becomes part of the publication's cultural project, whether it concurs or conflicts with the dominant ideologies of its new context. This process of transnational dialogue and interaction is particularly significant for the Latin American literary magazine, for a reason we have already established here: transnational cultural transfer is essential to the construction of a national cultural project.

These general precepts for understanding literary magazines in a Latin American context are all useful for an examination of *Orígenes*. As we will see, the Cuban journal,



in its own ways, confronts each of the central issues we have sketched out here. In a letter to his coeditor, Lezama remarks about the journal: “Variado y rápido va hacia su centro de nuevas integraciones” (“Varied and quick, it moves toward its center of new integrations”) (Correspondencia 128). This statement illustrates the editor’s emphasis on the importance of a journal’s integrity, dynamic as that integrity might be. If the journal is in a process of constant evolution, it should be evolving toward newer and more challenging “integrations” of disparate material. Jesús Barquet emphasizes this interrelation between evolution and coherence, when he asserts that each of the *origenista* journals is “... a *continuuus* (or process) animated by a univocal impulse that made each magazine and each number, not a mere compilation of disparate texts and illustrations, but rather the organic material configuration of a utopian project” (“...un *continuuus* (o proceso) animado por un impulso unívoco que hacía de cada revista y de cada número, no una mera compilación de textos e ilustraciones dispares, sino la orgánica configuración material de un proyecto utópico” (Consagración 55-6).

In order to explicitly establish a framework in which this process of integration might take place, the journal deploys programmatic statements to frame the cultural agenda to which each of its texts contributes. These programmatic statements are responses rather than evocations of creation *ex nihilo*; *Orígenes* situates itself in conflictive response to its *vanguardista* predecessors in Cuba, and posits a subtler relationship between the Cuban intellectual and his national and transnational contexts than do its predecessors. Finally, in what will be the central issue of this study, *Orígenes* positions and promotes itself as a site of transnational cultural dialogue in two ways. It does so explicitly by stating the importance of that very dialogue, and implicitly, through

the aesthetically and politically nuanced processes of soliciting, translating, and publishing foreign texts.

### **The Reaction against the *Vanguardia***

To understand the generational and national positioning of *Orígenes*, it is useful to consider the work of the majority of the *origenistas* as a reaction against the Cuban *vanguardia*.<sup>6</sup> The most significant mouthpiece for the Cuban *vanguardistas* was the *revista de avance*, which was published from 1927 to 1930. Marked by the presence of such figures as Nicolás Guillén, Alejo Carpentier, Juan Marinello and Jorge Mañach, the magazine possessed two important traits. First was a tendency toward explicit political protest, and second, an openly avant-garde stance on questions of literary form and content. The framers of *Orígenes* reacted against both of these qualities.

As Jesús Barquet asserts, *revista de avance* represented the height of *vanguardismo* (Consagración 15) in its abiding interest in formal innovations, and conscious as the group was of comparisons between its own literary production and that of other vanguard movements around the globe. It took its cue from the European avant-garde politically as well, participating in the *Protesta de los Trece* in 1923, the first collective expression of Cuban intellectuals' strong opposition to government corruption in the young history of the republic (Barquet, Consagración 14). In the *Declaración del Grupo Minorista*, in 1927, the year of the magazine's first number, they put forth a clear political platform upon which their literary production would be built. They explicitly advocated economic independence for Cuba and denounced the deleterious effects of U.S. imperialism on Cuban society. Further, they sought to expose the illusions of

democracy that were the projections of a corrupt plutocracy and advocated the direct participation of the people in their government (Barquet, *Consagración* 15). They were thus advocates of a renovation, not only of accepted literary forms, but also of the damaged institutions of the public sphere.

The *origenistas* chose to situate themselves quite differently in their literary and political contexts. In the first text of the first issue of *Orígenes*, José Lezama Lima and José Rodríguez Feo state their opposition to chameleon-like changes in artistic vision, in an implied reaction to the *avance* group: “Como no cambiamos con la [sic] estaciones, no tenemos que justificar en extensos alegatos una piel de camaleón. No nos interesan superficiales mutaciones, sino ir subrayando la toma de posesión del ser” (“As we do not change with the seasons, we do not have to justify, in extensive declarations, a chameleon’s skin. We are not interested in superficial mutations, but rather in emphasizing the act of taking possession of being”) (Lezama and Rodríguez-Feo 7). With incisive rhetoric, the editors of the new journal assert their disdain for a literary agenda that “changes with the seasons” of literary fashion and political exigency, adapting and reacting always to what is going on elsewhere, and never formulating a consistent and coherent cultural project. The editors criticize formal techniques, philosophical stances or political poses that betray their own superficiality, and in their place, they propose a project grounded in philosophical concerns that resist useless “mutations.”

Their concerns are grounded in what they call the humanist tradition, and their work thus is directed inward, toward the contemplation of human experience in a more universal or classical sense. Human experience, despite its ontological complexity, is

assumed to be more constant and universal than constantly evolving “-isms.”

Universality is an important value within this humanist program, posed in opposition to art that limits itself to documenting evanescent cultural realities and thus faces the danger of falling into irrelevance. In a 1952 essay in *Orígenes*, Lezama asserts, “...every work should tend to be a universal product, and not displayed with faked localisms of humility and daubs of makeup...” (“...toda obra nuestra debería tender a ser un producto universal, y no mostrada con fingidos localismos de humildad y pintarrajeos...”)  
(Alrededores 65).

Though the *Orígenes* group values the same political projects as the *avance* group—economic independence and the extirpation of public corruption—they ascribe different means by which the artist should participate in those projects’ advancement. As Barquet asserts, the *origenistas* question the model of the Latin American public intellectual formed by the legacy of such figures as José Martí, Andrés Bello and Domingo Sarmiento (Consagración 44). The *origenistas* counter the open and public political stance adopted by the generation of the *revista de avance* with a different conception of the cultural worker’s role in society. Their vision assigns to the artist the labor of reconstructing Cuban society, not by advocating the reorganization of public institutions, but rather by an ethical and artistic renewal of the individual.

As Barquet asserts, the *origenistas* hoped to construct a more “solid and lasting” (“sólido y perdurable”) republic of letters, in the face of the corruption of the Cuban state (Consagración 62). This process occurred exclusively through creative activity; thus we see in the magazine’s first programmatic statement an evocation of values like “liberty” and “justice” in both political *and* creative terms (Lezama and Rodríguez Feo 1944, 5).

In contrast to their predecessors, the *origenistas* did not encourage the pursuit of these values in the political sphere, but rather in a different space—one marked by both individual and collective creative action.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it would be wrong to assert that *Orígenes* marks a moment of complete disengagement from political concerns. Its contributors simply worked toward a shift in the arena of art’s function in society from the public toward the private. It was through private pursuits that the public sphere might be renewed.

As they shift the arena of art’s proper functioning from the public to the private, the *origenistas* envision the root of political and cultural “disintegration” as a lack of imagination, rather than a question of societal structure. The description of the problem is couched in a poetic rhetoric that suggests poetic solutions:

Cerca del índice crítico que señala la falta de imaginación estatal, que no es en definitiva sino la ausencia de una proyección o impulsión por zonas más espléndidas, es necesario ir ya entregando las formas superadoras de esa desintegración. Si ese señalamiento es esencialmente crítico, su remedio tendrá que brotar de creación y de imagen. (Desintegración, 60)

Near the critical index that points out the State’s lack of imagination, which is clearly nothing less than the absence of a projection of impulsion through more splendid zones, it is necessary to begin to provide the forms that will overcome that disintegration. If that assertion is essentially critical, its remedy will have to emerge from creation and from the image.

Though the editors acknowledge the importance of the “critical index” that lays out the dilemmas facing Cuban culture, their analysis tends to veer from historiographical and political modes of analysis in order to reformulate cultural problems in poetic terms. This formulation, designating a lack of “imagination” and “projection,” determines the nature of the proper response: the artistic creation of new images with which to construct a sense of national identity.

This way of imagining the national space is a response to the perceived failure of politically committed writers to work effectively in the traditional spaces of public discourse in Cuba and elsewhere. Because the *origenistas* believe that public discourse has been so profoundly contaminated by corruption in its various forms, they revise the role of the politically engaged writer that is such an important element of their national tradition. They opt to avoid the failures of political engagement by redefining the nation in terms that allow them, as artists, a more direct role in the process of reform. Thus, the nation, as imagined in *Orígenes*, is a created and creative phenomenon, a spiritual mode of existence that art is especially well-equipped to recuperate and sustain. In her 1948 essay “La Cuba Secreta,” the Spanish philosopher María Zambrano provides a particularly useful distillation of this concept, summarizing a perspective that shaped the magazine’s projects from its inception four years earlier. Zambrano asserts: “...la patria pre-natal es la poesía viviente, el fundamento poético de la vida, el secreto de nuestro ser terrenal ... Cuba: substancia poética visible ya. Cuba: mi secreto” (4) (“...the prenatal homeland is living poetry, the poetic foundation of life, the secret of our earthly being ... Cuba: visible poetic substance. Cuba: my secret”). Defining the nation in poetic and religious terms, and positing it in a way that gives the individual imagination a role in

reshaping it, clears the ground for a direct and fundamental intervention in the national process by the kind of literature *Orígenes* promotes. This move helps the *origenistas* define their project in such a way that they can avoid a basic dilemma facing politically engaged writers: how to reconcile the individual and creative nature of their work with the collective and purportedly objective nature of the political discourse they are trying to transform.

Working in concert with Zambrano's spiritual definition of nationality, Cintio Vitier's image of rebirth through creative activity revises the model of politically committed literature by focusing intensely on the effects of political corruption on the identity of the individual:

...siendo como hijos abortivos de una gestación interrumpida, sentíamos la necesidad imposible, casi desesperada, de volver a nacer, de re-nacer, y para ello sentíamos oscuramente la necesidad de des-nacer, de borrar un nacimiento fraudulento y culpable ... des-nacer y volver a nacer, o nacer no realmente de la nada, como ingenuamente fuera supuesto por la pasión juvenil, sino de sí misma, como lo pidiera Martí para toda la América nuestra. (Para llegar 86)

...being like abortive children of an interrupted gestation, we felt the impossible, almost desperate, need to go back and be born, to be reborn, and towards that purpose, we felt in an obscure way the need to be unborn, to erase a fraudulent and guilty birth ... to be unborn and be born again, or be born not really from nothing, as was ingenuously supposed by juvenile passion, but rather from oneself, as Martí had asked of all of our America.

Vitier compares the forestalled progress of the young republic to a premature birth that produces children who are unready for even the most basic forms of survival. The near-hyperbolic reach of his rhetoric consciously extends beyond the assessment of Cuban society that undergirds the *avance* project. Vitier, like other *origenistas*, acknowledges the effect of U.S. imperialism upon Cuban culture, though he is also typical of his group in locating the most devastating effects of this and other corrosive forces within the individual identity, rather than limiting them to extrinsic institutional manifestations. At the historical moment of Vitier's statement, the operative Cuban notion of individual identity and agency in society has become the product of an illegitimate union of corrupt political forces. In order to undo the effects of that union, each individual must strive, through creative acts, to be unborn and reborn. Vitier's metaphor acknowledges the role of political forces in constituting the individual while at the same time rejecting the possibility of revising the work of those forces through political engagement.

The statements by the editors as well as by Zambrano and Vitier, all betray an emphasis on the moral renewal of the *polis*. Rather than engage the pragmatics of the political issues of their moment, the group proposed a creative investigation into the ethical issues at the heart of social conduct. By renovating conduct through creative activity, broader values like justice and equality could be set on a firmer foundation. Respect for creative and philosophical differences, for example, is not only an important mode of conduct, but was also a means toward the goal of freedom: "La libertad consiste para nosotros en el respeto absoluto que merece el trabajo por la creación..." ("For us, liberty consists of the absolute respect that work for the sake of creation deserves...") (Lezama and Rodríguez Feo, 1944, 5). Art's role was not to voice slogans or cry out in



protest, but rather to start with the individual, with an exploration of the connections of the Self to the Other that are illuminated specifically through artistic creation. Only in this way could the pathologies afflicting the public sphere be cured.

Vitier's work provides one of the clearest manifestations of concern for the *origenista* ethics and the interrogation of the philosophical foundations of those ethics. The first stage of the examination is one of questioning. As Enrique Saínz points out, Vitier's early poetry evidences existential concerns, and betrays an attitude of profound self-questioning that leads to a stage of great confusion, especially of the individual's relationships with the natural and social worlds surrounding him (51-52). This stage can be seen as a clearing of the ground for a new awareness of the importance of the Other that develops in Vitier's poetry of the *Orígenes* period. In his poem "El desposeído" ("The dispossessed"), published in the journal in 1954, the existential struggle feeds a longing for contact with an Other that remains fantasmatic without the realization of an essential, longed-for communion: "Estoy solo escuchando esos fantasmas/ que en el crepúsculo vienen a mirarme/ con ansia de que yo los incorpore" ("I am alone listening to the ghosts/ who, in the dawn, come to gaze at me/ anxious for me to incorporate them") (16-18). This Other is ubiquitous in Vitier's poetry, and its nature is always a subtle and challenging interpenetration of philosophical, social and political, and religious significances.

Vitier, like the *Orígenes* group as a whole, privileges poetry's epistemological status, and sees his writing as a means for the acquisition of knowledge. Poetry's role is to work toward a clearer understanding of the ethical foundations of social life, an activity that is prerequisite to the possibility of lasting political reform. This

understanding, for Vitier, consists of a hard-won rediscovery of three central truths: “la caridad, la comunión, el prójimo” (Obras 204) (“charity, communion, one’s fellow man”). These verities are of course in no way new, but have been arrived at through great creative and spiritual labor and thus are apprehended more completely. It is important to note the textual and conceptual centrality of communion in Vitier’s trinity of values. It of course illustrates the Catholic theology undergirding his ethical system, but further, it suggests a form of connection with the Other, whether godly or human, that is infused with mystery. His use of the term evokes a connectedness that cannot be reduced to a social or political relationship, but rather emerges from a miraculous transformation. Thus we see how Vitier grounds the political potential of art in its ability to apprehend spiritual, rather than sociological, features of the individual and the society.

### **Lezama’s Theory of the Poetic Image**

A crucial poetic foundation for the *origenista* aesthetics is Lezama’s concept of the image. The image is for him a dynamic force, moving fluidly through time, evolving and undergoing constant permutations. Throughout history, artists participate in these processes, shaping images into forms never seen before, forms that will be taken up and reshaped by future creators. In this context, we can better understand the universality toward which *Orígenes* strives: great art must call forth and manipulate images that have participated in history and that will gain new relevance in the future through the artist’s creative intervention in the present. Thus, radical innovation is not the goal of art; instead, the participation in fluid, multiple and universal traditions of creation marks the great artist.

This notion of the history of art facilitates surprisingly fluid connections among creative artifacts from different epochs and cultures. In the opening paragraphs of his essay “Mitos y cansancio clásico,” Lezama admits that images can only be understood in a historical context, yet the kind of historical analysis he exemplifies is quite idiosyncratic. It is clearly not a history of influence, a kind of narrative that relies on limited and concrete relations of cause and effect. Later in the same essay, Lezama extols the freedom of the creative genius to supercede simplistic causalities in the offering of his or her imaginative vision (15).<sup>8</sup> Lezama’s historical narrativization is marked by fluid homologies, held in flux by the constant activity of what he calls “el sujeto metafórico,” a subjectivity that intervenes in history, drawing connections among disparate images, preventing images patterns from becoming static (11). This subjectivity is at work in every creative act that takes up a pattern and suggests a way of redrawing it, notably in the analysis of historiographical image structures found in Lezama’s essays. Thus, as Abel Prieto asserts, causality is not abandoned altogether in Lezama’s historiography; instead, a different concept of cause and effect is at work in the connections drawn among images (vi).

This new principle privileges the activity of a critical subjectivity that has been shaped by a poetic sense of images and their relations to one another. This subjectivity allows a freer play of signification and approaches images as entities in a state of constant metamorphosis rather than as static markers of a determined set of historical relations. Thus, a poetic causality is at work in Lezama’s system. This implies that the connective and ordering force may originate in the subjectivity, but does not confine itself to the subjective realm. In “Introducción a un Sistema Poético,” Lezama describes the

movement of poetic discourse as “...the march from the unreal to the real” (“...la marcha de lo irreal hacia lo real”) (37). Poetic discourse facilitates processes of coming-into-being. The reshaped image moves from the imagination of the artist into the realm of shared meaning, reconfiguring the image systems that structure what are thought of as non-subjective systems of knowledge, such as history.

It is important to note that Lezama applies the flexible principle of causality seen in his writing on the history of visual or literary art to all kinds of historical narrative. All history is for Lezama the history of images. Poetic discourse takes primacy, becoming the source of history, rather than a system of elaborations on historical fact. In “Las imágenes posibles,” Lezama asserts that poetry manifests “...a conception of the world as image. The image as an absolute, the image that knows that it is an image, the image as the last of all possible histories” (“...una concepción del mundo como imagen. La imagen como un absoluto, la imagen que se sabe imagen, la imagen como la última de las historias posibles”) (3).

Thus, all history is constantly shaped and reshaped by the creative work of the “sujeto metafórico.”<sup>9</sup> This subject works in a temporal plane whose boundaries shift abruptly, making possible the surprising imagistic homologies Lezama describes in his essays. In privileging the fluid nature of the image’s existence in time over what historians might attempt to assert as unquestionable fact, Lezama brings to the fore a creative subjectivity that demands a profound measure of freedom not only in the face of chronology, but also in relation to other intellectual disciplines.

As described in his essays, this subjectivity tends to leave behind the world of concrete experience in order to dwell in a more fictive realm where “experience” means

the experience of art. The dynamic counterpoints that illustrate the image's essential relationality take precedence over dialectics of the real and the ideal, of the imaginative and the empirical. Lezama and Rodríguez Feo's questioning of the art-life duality is grounded in a poetics that stretches the category of the empirical to include the contemplation of fictive realities.

### **The Catholicity and Catholicism of *Orígenes***

An association with Catholicism was clearly central to the *origenista* identity. Nonetheless, the journal did not function like a cultural appendage of the Church. Its framers dealt with thematics associated with Catholicism and held a particular interest in Catholic writers, especially French Catholic poets like Paul Claudel. Yet the journal did not concern itself much with questions of doctrine. Faith and religious contemplation are driving energies behind much of the creative production of *origenistas*, though the manifestations of those energies are rarely dogmatic in nature.

Instead, the Catholicism of *Orígenes* manifests itself as a constellation of ideas and social practices rooted in Catholic culture rather than in a strictly defined Catholic creed. The programmatic statements of Lezama, Rodríguez Feo, Vitier, and others, along with what we know of the social interactions of the *origenistas*, tell us that the group subscribed to a communitarian ethos and aesthetics. Alfredo Chacón describes the *origenistas* as a “congregation” (27). They saw themselves as a creative group whose cohesiveness and collaborative spirit operated under the aegis of their shared Catholicism. The banquets, readings, and celebrations, held at the priest and poet Ángel Gaztelu's church in Havana, were the clearest expressions of this association of

*communitas* and creativity. The interactions of the *origenistas* embody a concept of communion and an emphasis on ceremony. These social characteristics are not peripheral to their literary production, but rather are asserted as a force driving that production.<sup>10</sup>

*Orígenes* is also Catholic, not just in its positive assertions, but also in contrast to a certain notion of what it means to be Protestant. This oppositional definition is more cultural than it is theological; it derives from differing social attitudes and philosophical understandings of human experience. The distinction between Catholic and Protestant cultures is of great significance for this study in particular. The textual encounters between U.S. and Cuban literary traditions are, viewed broadly, a Protestant-Catholic encounter. José Rodríguez Feo, the principal orchestrator of the cultural counterpoints examined in this study, plays a crucial role in expounding the distinction between the two cultural orientations, avowing an allegiance to a Catholic cultural identity in his essays, correspondence and translations. As intermediary figure, he takes it upon himself to maintain this cultural distinction as an operative discursive structure in the textual encounters he coordinates. He sees this task as an important function in defining and defending *origenismo*.

Again, the Catholicism we speak of here is cultural, rather than dogmatic. Thus, despite the profound social strictures of the Church, *origenistas* like Lezama and Rodríguez Feo betray permissive attitudes toward sexuality, and a belief in the importance of fully enjoying sensual pleasures of all kinds without concern about questions of sin or damnation. They believe in being catholic—broad minded and accepting of disparate kinds of faith.<sup>11</sup> They identify their Catholicism with the personal

traits of expressiveness and candor. One who is culturally Protestant is quite different, according to this way of thinking: narrow-minded, judgmental, dogmatic, repressed and laconic.

In his essay on Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Rodríguez Feo, through his role as literary scholar, mediates a textual encounter between Protestant and Catholic ideologies. He makes it his purpose to explain, to a culturally Catholic readership, the influence of a Protestant worldview on Captain Ahab's actions. He emphasizes the cultural dissonance between Melville's text and a Cuban cultural context when he comments: "Con un concepto de la persona como el que anima a los novelistas católicos no se podría jamás crear un héroe protestante comparable a Ahab. Esto es lo que en gran parte impide una comprensión adecuada de la novelística americana" (18). ("With a concept of the person like the one that animates Catholic novelists, one could never create a Protestant hero comparable to Ahab. This is what, in large part, impedes an adequate comprehension of the U.S. novel.") In his explication, Rodríguez Feo uses Ahab as an illustration of the dangerous extremes to which the ideologies of Protestantism tend.

In his explanation of the philosophical bases of Ahab's mania, Rodríguez Feo lays out a system of Protestant thought and action that serves as an implicit foil to the Catholicism of *Orígenes*. Because of what he calls the "spiritual decadence" of U.S. Protestantism, caused by its association with Calvinism and Puritanism, the very story of Christ's life is perverted into a saga of supreme individualism: "...la interpretación de la muerte y resurrección de Cristo sufre el influjo de las doctrinas nuevas. En esta decadencia espiritual, Cristo no se nos aparece como Dios convertido en Hombre para redimir a la humanidad; es el rebelde sacrificado por una sociedad innoble..." (17)

(“...the interpretation of the death and resurrection of Christ suffers from the influence of new doctrines. In this spiritual decadence, Christ does not appear to us as God become Man to redeem humanity; he is the rebel sacrificed by an ignoble society...”). Where the Catholic viewpoint would emphasize redemption as the essence of the Christ story, Rodríguez Feo asserts that U.S. Protestantism uses the story to elevate a concept of individualism “*in extremis*” (17).

The extremity of this individualism results in the pathological tendency toward spiritual and intellectual self-isolation exemplified by Ahab. Further, it leads to fanatical and reckless extremes of hubris that lead the captain to consider himself a god (19). Rodríguez Feo’s insistence on Ahab’s dangerous individualism implies a central value of Catholicism. Whereas Ahab laments his inability to find comfort in other human beings, Rodríguez Feo asserts the Catholic values of communion, *communitas*, and *agapé*. Indeed, at the closing of the essay, the author strays from his methodology of implicit argumentation into a moralization: “La salvación de Ahab, la de todos los hombres, depende de su habilidad y su capacidad de amar a sus semejantes. Esta es la lección suprema de *Moby Dick*” (21) (“The salvation of Ahab, and of all men, depends on the ability and capacity to love one’s fellow man. This is the supreme lesson of *Moby Dick*”).

In his insistence on the impossibility of redemption for Ahab, Rodríguez Feo points up a crucial difference of perspective between the Protestant and the Catholic. Whereas the Protestant who believes in the Calvinist doctrine of predestination would see a sinful man as doomed (16), the Catholic is confident in the abiding potential for salvation. Rodríguez Feo’s underscoring of this issue resonates with the essential



optimism of the dominant *origenista* poetics. Lezama and Vitier are especially representative of this optimism, subscribing to the essential assertion that redemption, regeneration and illumination are perpetually available to the individual through the supernatural alchemy of the poetic act. Rodríguez Feo's vision of U.S. culture and literature implies a binary relationship to this Catholic optimism; the Cuban critic betrays the belief that North American cultural production is fundamentally shaped by a pessimism about the situation of human beings in the physical and the spiritual worlds.

Rodríguez Feo's essay on André Gide, published in *Orígenes* in 1951, continues this project of cultural self-identification in opposition to Protestantism, introducing the issue of self-repression. Gide represents, for Rodríguez Feo, many of the prototypical Protestant or "puritan" traits. Gide suffers an interior tension that would never trouble a true Catholic; he longs for a full, sensual existence in the world, yet is prevented by his own prudish morality and self-absorption: "En vano se movió entre esos los dos dilemas del existir y del pensar; del mirar y no compartir en la vida que lo rodeaba, tan llena de tentaciones y de delicias" (58) ("In vain he moved between those two dilemmas of existing and thinking, of watching and not sharing in the life, so full of temptations and delights, that surrounded him"). A definition of the Catholic character is implicit in Rodríguez Feo's critique: it is marked by an open attitude to pleasure and to "shar[ing]" that pleasure with others. Where the Catholic values communion in its sacred and interpersonal senses, the Protestant Gide is intensely introverted and secretive: "...sus tribulaciones lo conducía [sic] a la confesión íntima, al secreteo, a la escritura de diarios o de cartas personalísimas" (56) ("...his tribulations led him to the intimate confession, to secretiveness, to the writing of diaries or of extremely personal letters"). According to

the Catholic ethic, these inner struggles are what should be exteriorized and shared. The assertion, in the opening editorial statement in *Orígenes*, that literature should “show” individuals in their moments of greatest “tension” and “fever” illustrates the fact that Lezama and Rodríguez Feo feel this “Catholic” trait is essential to the journal’s aesthetics (5).

It is clear that Rodríguez Feo identifies the “Catholic” with the Cuban, a crucial connection in his thinking and in the thinking of *origenismo* in general. He illustrates the link between religion and culture when he writes to Wallace Stevens that “an Antillean” gives himself up to sensuality without the puritan’s crippling propensity to self-punishment: “To my tropical senses all of Gide’s struggles seem a bore. Why didn’t he make up his mind and go to bed with the grocer boy and stop all that nonsense about God and the mortal sin? An Antillean goes to bed and that’s that” (Secretaries 194). In what seems like a casual comment, it is nonetheless clear that an operative cultural self-definition is at work. This self-definition—marked by an emphasis on the erotic, on freedom and on experience—is not incidental to the literary mission of *Orígenes*; it is deployed, through Rodríguez Feo’s essay on Gide, as an element in the definition of a particular Cuban literary project.

Thus, it is not surprising that Rodríguez Feo makes a connection between Protestant cultural traits and U.S. literature. If *Orígenes*, as a Cuban cultural production, must necessarily evidence Catholic cultural traits, then U.S. literature must inevitably illustrate the Protestantism that is so pervasive in its national culture. In his essay on *Moby Dick*, Rodríguez Feo asserts that a Protestant cultural background will shape the work of an individual U.S. author (18), though he does not go so far as to define

Protestantism or “puritanism” as a basis for all of U.S. literature. In his essay on Gide, he does just that: “...André Gide es un precursor, suprema ironía, de la literatura norteamericana contemporánea, que por otro lado él fué uno de los primeros en descubrir y elogiar desmesuradamente” (57) (“André Gide is a precursor, supreme irony, of contemporary North American literature, which on the other hand he was one of the first to discover and praise inordinately”).

This assertion is crucial; it offers an important insight into Rodríguez Feo’s attitude toward the literature of the U.S., of which he is such an avid student. A notion of Protestantism or “puritanism” is central to his critical image of the cultural foundations of U.S. literature. Thus, the traits Gide possesses are typical of North American writers, in Rodríguez Feo’s estimation. This opinion is active in all of his thinking as a critic and in his operations as a translator as well, given the grounding of acts of translation in operative interpretive constructs. We will see this notion of a Protestant cultural and literary personality emerge as a minor thematic in Rodríguez Feo’s exchanges with Stevens. More significantly, it will fundamentally inform Rodríguez Feo’s processing of T. S. Eliot’s poems for incorporation into *Orígenes*.

### **Modes of Religiosity in *Orígenes*: Mysticism, Genesis, Revelation**

Having established the magazine’s cultural, philosophical, and social identification with Catholicism, it is necessary to delve further into the central currents of religious thinking in *Orígenes*. The journal’s identification with certain Catholic cultural traits is not the limit of the journal’s engagement with religious concerns; an exploration of the content of operative religious convictions is necessary. The theological

foundations of the journal's aesthetics are a complex issue. Because these foundations are marked by internal counterpoints and dissonances, it is difficult to propose a unitary model for discussing each author's individual orientation. What I propose is a limited, but illustrative starting point for discussing the varied religiosities of the *origenistas*. I will place them in relation to a cultural precedent of significant religious and literary importance—the mysticism of the Spanish monk and poet St. John of the Cross (San Juan de la Cruz) (1542 – 1591). Examining the distinct ways in which *origenistas* respond to this tradition will illuminate the dialogue between their poetics and their theologies.

Mysticism is generally understood as a mode of religiosity which can be active within the broader space of any religion. It orients itself toward the reconciliation and union of the created with the Creator. Margaret Smith describes it as “...an attitude of mind; an innate tendency of the human soul, which seeks to transcend reason and to attain to a direct experience of God, and which believes that it is possible for the human soul to be united with Ultimate Reality, when ‘God ceases to be an object and becomes an experience’” (3).<sup>12</sup> The “transcendence” of reason, which also implies a transcendence of what can be expressed in language, is the means. The end is the unmediated experience of the Divine, usually described as a union.

Any form of mysticism presupposes that the general state of human existence is one of separation from God. Traces of God's grace can be found in Creation, but those traces only create a sense of longing for a lost presence. The idea of *Deus absconditus* is the impulse behind mystic disciplines. Michel de Certeau points out that in the Christian mysticisms of the sixteenth century—the time of St. John of the Cross—the feeling of God's absence came to be expressed as an erotic longing. Certeau attributes this

eroticization to the increasing influence of courtly love poetry on religious discourse since the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Fable 4). In this evolution, there is a "...slow transformation of the religious setting into an amorous one, or of faith into eroticism. It tells how a body 'touched' by desire and engraved, wounded, written by the other, replaced the revelatory, didactic word" (5). This fusion of erotic and devotional feeling is, initially, a heterodox development that invites accusations of blasphemy, as the case of St. John of the Cross's imprisonment illustrates.<sup>13</sup> Yet, the pronounced aesthetic element of Catholicism also provides fertile ground for the establishment of mysticism as a central current of Catholic religiosity, as it is largely recognized to be today.

Certeau emphasizes that the discourses of mysticism permeate much of Western cultural expression since the sixteenth century. He argues that the harnessing of the energy of an erotic longing mobilizes a peculiarly "'Western' productivity" in theology, art, and literature (4). Yet, when it develops into a methodology for achieving a union with the object of longing, this productivity is marked by a peculiar paradox. Mysticism is largely a verbal (or visual) system that seeks to describe the means for achieving a union with God. Yet it runs into the impossibility of describing, in any semiotic system, what that union consists of; the language of mysticism reaches toward the inexpressible.

Certeau identifies the central rhetorical feature of mysticism as the oxymoron, and mentions St. John's phrases "sweet burning" and "silent music" as examples (143). If mysticism involves the transcendence of reason, as Smith asserts, then the oxymoron is the device that points the way to that transcendence. As Certeau explains:

...the oxymoron belongs to the category of the *metasememe*, which, like the demonstrative, refers to something beyond language. It is deictic: it shows what it

does not say. The combination of the two terms is substituted for the existence of a third, which is posited as absent. It makes a hole in language. It roughs out a space for the unsayable. It is language directed toward non-language. (143)

Mysticism thus is marked not only by a particular thematics—the eroticized longing and pursuit of the divine beloved—but also by a clear set of discursive operations that posit the absence of their referent both in the world and in discourse. This discourse is structured by vectors that point in the direction of something beyond what is locatable.

The other paradox that is fundamental in Christian mysticism generally, and in St. John’s work specifically, is the coexistence of a disciplinary element of abnegation, whereby bodily desires are suppressed, and a poetic language that describes the union with God in erotic terms. As we will see, Lezama and Rodríguez Feo’s thinking plays on this tension, and resolves it by identifying more closely with the *poetics* of mysticism than with the spiritual *discipline* of renunciation. The fusion of the erotic and the spiritual is a legacy that *origenistas* embrace as part of their Catholic inheritance. The disciplining of the body, which is such a crucial element in Christian mysticisms, is something they associate with the repressions of Protestantism. This slippage of association is central to the coordination of poetics with theology in *Orígenes*.

In St. John’s *Subida al Monte Carmelo* (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*), the discipline of abnegation is taught as a means toward a union with God that is metaphorically evoked in the universally-known poem “La noche oscura del alma” (“The Dark Night of the Soul”). This poem can be found in the preface to the chapters on the disciplinary process in *Subida*, evoking the goal of the mystic quest in ravishingly beautiful language. Then, in the prose that follows, St. John lays out in clear terms the demands of the

discipline through which this union can be achieved. In St. John's mysticism, the erotics of the poetry and the renunciation prescribed in the prose are linked with no sense of tension. The description of the amorous encounter between believer and God is the closest metaphorical approximation to an experience that is beyond the bodily and, as we have established, beyond language. The physical erotic drive is completely supplanted by a total surrender to God that is *like* a sexual act, but is not in itself physical.

In *Subida al Monte Carmelo*, St. John describes the progressive stages of the mystic discipline. First, the practitioner must enter into a "night of the senses," in which all bodily "appetites" are abandoned. Next, the individual must enter a deeper darkness, in which reason no longer functions; an "emptying" of memory and thought occurs in order to make room for the reception of spiritual Truth. Subsequently, the will is dissolved, and the practitioner renounces his ability to achieve a state of union with God through righteous actions. As Rowan Williams explains, this renunciation "...reduce[es] human spiritual activity to the one act of faith and longing" (179). At this stage, a state of profound suffering is experienced; subjectively, the practitioner feels the total absence of any comforts or spiritual consolations. As Williams asserts, this suffering consists of "...an identification with Jesus and the carrying of his cross" (179). It is in this state that the soul, in absolute passivity, longing and suffering, is prepared for God's voluntary movement of union with it.

"La noche oscura" picks up where this discipline, when pushed to its limits, leaves off. The speaker of the poem has arrived at the state of total readiness for the loving union with God. It is interesting to note that the speaker of the poem is female; St. John asserts that the identity of the mystic who has reached the ultimate stage of his or

her discipline is inevitably feminine. The speaker signifies her renunciation of worldly pleasure by leaving home in the middle of the night, crossing the threshold from familial and domestic satisfactions to a space of spiritual satisfaction. The light of the senses, the reason, and the will is utterly absent, and is replaced by the light burning in the heart of the speaker (15).

The speaker is utterly alone; the abnegation of her desires and thoughts necessitates an abnegation of social connection. The spiritual journey the speaker takes must be taken alone. She leaves her house “unnoticed” (“sin ser notada”)—implicitly, by her husband, whose affections are to be replaced—and arrives at a place where “no one appeared” (“nadie parecía”) (20). At the moment of union with the Beloved, the speaker is “transformed” (25); the alterations made in the discipline of abnegation lead to a total relationship with God.

This relationship is evoked in concrete human imagery. The Beloved rests his head on the speaker’s “flowery breast” (“mi pecho florido”) (26), and she runs her fingers through his hair (32). The imagistic and conceptual center of the poem follows, when God touches the speaker: “his serene hand/ wounded my neck,/ and suspended all of my senses” (“con su mano serena/ en mi cuello hería/ y todos mis sentimientos suspendía”) (33-35). The serenity and the violence with which God touches the lover is emblematic of Certeau’s description of the mystic oxymoron. A tension in language plays a “deictic” function, pointing toward a transcendent reality—God’s love—which cannot be contained within language.

Having seen both the discipline and the poetic suggestion of that discipline’s goal, a crucial question for the purposes of this study arises: what happens after the mystic



experience? Colin Thompson attempts to correct the view that what occurs at the moment of mystic union is the *permanent* dissolution of the human identity in God. He asserts that the “transformation” that occurs in the mystic union is of the soul, not of the entire identity (11). This is the *theistic* understanding of the mystic union, one that Thompson asserts is operative in St. John’s thought (12).

*Origenistas*, and particularly Lezama, show evidence of a *monistic* view of St. John’s mysticism, wherein it is believed that “...the self is merged into the One and loses its identity...” (Thompson 11). This view motivates the efforts of *origenistas* to revise St. John’s mysticism, as they see the total absorption of the individual in God to be incompatible with the human task of poetry. They see no way in which the mystic can return to an existence in time and in the concrete world, so they separate the religious and the poetic aspects of St. John’s work, revising what they think are his theological ideas and celebrating the exquisite beauty of his verse.

In *Orígenes*, this contrapuntal dialogue with St. John’s mystic poetry is at work at the earliest stages of the development of the Orígenes group. Texts by St. John and works that explicitly pay homage to him are found throughout the early *origenista* magazines.<sup>14</sup> In the second issue of *Verbum* (1937), Ángel Gaztelu pays tribute to the Spanish mystic in the sonnet “San Juan de la Cruz.” The sonnet responds to St. John’s most famous poem in a way that is paradigmatic for the dialogue that other *origenistas* maintain with this part of their religious and poetic tradition. Gaztelu draws on St. John for inspiration, though he places even greater emphasis on the sensory intensity of the mystic experience than the Spanish mystic does. The body receives the “imprint” of the divine (El pecho.../impreso en claridad de alta figura” (2)), and is able to taste the

“celestial sweetness” (“celestial dulzura” (6)) of heavenly perfection. As Jesús Barquet observes, Gaztelu allows more importance for earthly elements than does St. John (España 38).

For the Spanish mystic, sensory experiences, like the feeling of being “inflamed” by love, serve an intermediary and metaphorical function, pointing to a non-sensory reality that is the ultimate object of contemplation. As we have seen, the oxymoron occupies a central area of this metaphorical discourse, drawing a vector that points away from the plane of language. For Gaztelu, and other *origenistas* who respond to St. John, certain sensory experiences, usually a visual image of natural beauty, are moments when the interpenetration of the divine and the earthly is apprehended. Whereas St. John is at pains to remind his disciples that the true experience of God can be only imperfectly understood in physical terms, the *origenista* poetics attests to the immanence of the divine in nature. Nonetheless, within the group, there are divergent visions of the nature of human access to that experience of the divine and of the methodology for recreating that experience in poetry. As we will see, Lezama describes a much more active role for the poet, ascribing to him the ability to literally enact the union of the divine with the terrestrial through the power of the poetic image.

Lezama’s work draws inspiration from, and engages in dialogue with, St. John’s legacy, though he follows the spirit of St. John’s assertion of the possibility of an individual encounter with the divine, rather than the strict methodology that the mystic develops. Lezama builds on St. John’s sensory and erotic metaphors for spiritual experience and allows them even freer reign than is allowed in Gaztelu’s poetry. In his prose poem “Noche dichosa”—which, like the title of the journal in which it appeared,

*Nadie parecía*, is taken from St. John's "Noche oscura"—Lezama puts forth a personal version of St. John's poem that extends the zone of intersection between the body and spirit found in the Spanish mystic's work.

Lezama's poem follows the outline of its precedent, portraying the nocturnal emergence from a domestic space into a space of divine illumination. In the poem, a fisherman emerges at night from his hut and enters a river, where the experience of his own body in the water is the medium for an experience of the divine. This experience is a version of the erotic union of lover and Beloved in St. John's poem. Significantly, the body of Lezama's speaker interacts with a natural reality (the water of the river) rather than with an embodied God. Nature is in itself allowed to be a site for contact with the divine.

Returning home, the fisherman finds his hut, as well as his own body, illuminated, and God smiles benevolently on the scene. As a natural expression of his joy the fisherman begins to urinate (1). Lezama pushes the corporality of St. John's discourse to a rebellious extreme, asserting an affiliation between the body and the spirit that is so total that even the body's basest functions are expressions of transcendence.

In addition to the extension of the zone of contact between the body and the spirit, we find in Lezama's work a radical revision of the essential passivity that characterizes the mystic's preparation for union with God. Lezama asserts a supreme creative agency for the poet in his quest for revelation. It is true that his poetry evidences the same awareness of the absence of God in creation that motivates the mystic search; there is always a distance, across which a reconciliation between humanity and divinity must be made. Yet, his reaction is different from the mystic response to this distance. In

Lezama's estimation, the task of the artist is to replicate God's action of creating the universe through the sacred Word. The need for this replication stems from humanity's fallen state and its subsequent loss of pure connection to nature. In this context, we can more fully understand the supreme importance Lezama places on artistic creation, as for him it consists of a profoundly sacred act. As Gustavo Pellón succinctly puts it, "Nature for Lezama evokes Genesis, the garden of Eden, the fall of Adam and Eve. Poetry (or life; for Lezama it is one and the same) has as its goal the recuperation of that nature lost through original sin" (48). Without poetry, our experience of nature would be the experience of a reality devoid of illumination by the divine. The role of the poet is of enormous importance; it is he or she who, by reshaping nature through language, restores its primal sanctity.

Lezama builds upon the same erotics of absence Certeau describes in his theorization of the nature of mysticism, though his response is to assert the possibility of *enacting* the contact between the human and the divine, rather than waiting longingly for that contact. Further, this contact is made, not through the mystic rejection of the senses, but rather in the poetic manipulation of sensory materials. At the closing of his essay "Introducción a un sistema poético," Lezama asserts that the possibility of reconciliation between the human and the divine is the product of a spiritual capacity bestowed upon poets by "a divinity." This gift is one of potential; the contact between man and gods must be actively sought by poets when "...through the visible conjured in poetry they attempt to draw close to the smiling unknown of the gods" ("...a través de lo visible conjurado en la poesía intentan acercarse al risueño desconocido de los dioses") (58).

The poet as conjurer makes a concrete reality appear. This reality becomes a medium, a zone of transit toward contact with the gods.

In Lezama's poem "Noche insular: Jardines invisibles" ("Insular Night, Invisible Gardens"), the speaker calls out for the reconciliation of the human and the godly within the space of the visible:

Dance la luz reconciliando  
al hombre con sus dioses desdeñosos.  
Ambos sonrientes, diciendo  
los vencimientos de la muerte universal  
y la calidad tranquila de la luz. (186-190)

Let light dance, reconciling  
man with his disdainful gods.  
Both smiling, speaking  
the defeat of universal death  
and the tranquil quality of light.

Through the act of invocation, the speaker seeks to animate the visible, making light dance; this intervention into the visible makes possible the communication between humanity and the gods who had previously separated themselves and remained aloof from the human world. Human speech is twinned with godly speech; in unison, their utterance creates the reality of immortality ("the defeat of universal death"). In this fusion of sensory and spiritual spaces, human resurrection and eternal life are made possible. Thus, in a strikingly heterodox turn, the speaker announces the possibility of

salvation through the poetic act. Lezama's poetic animations of nature repeatedly restage just this kind of restoration of spiritual nature through the image.

Thus, St. John's most important legacy for the Cuban poet is his heterodoxy. The individual will supplant Grace in Lezama's appropriation of St. John's language. Lezama embraces the heterodoxy and eroticism of St. John's poetry, while rejecting the discipline of sensual abnegation the mystic prescribes in his treatises. Mysticism becomes for Lezama an incomplete movement toward a freer religiosity that celebrates the erotic and the individual.

Rodríguez Feo evidences a similar outlook. In a letter to Stevens, Rodríguez Feo implicitly agrees with a definition of mysticism put forth in Mark Schorer's *William Blake: The Politics of Vision*:

Of course, the mystic is in disaccord with the poet and Mr. Schorer puts it very well: "Mysticism in its highest moment is without images or symbols, it is entirely *non-sensory*, just as it is without ideas that relate to nature." Thus we can well say that even St. John of the Cross was not a mystic poet, but was a mystic who wrote the most perfect poetry of the Spanish language. (Secretaries 95)<sup>15</sup>

Rodríguez Feo, like Lezama, sees mysticism as a permanent abandonment of the senses. He thus separates this spiritual state of being from the sensuous nature of poetry. This opinion is based on the monistic view of the mystic union. Rodríguez Feo and Lezama both discard the problematics of the *intersection* between abnegative discipline and erotic metaphoricity in St. John, in favor of a division that allows them to reject the renunciation of the body and privilege the aesthetic nature of St. John's poetry. This vision of the strengths and inadequacies of St. John's legacy is an operative element in

Lezama and Rodríguez Feo's aesthetics, a fact that will become clear in our analysis of T. S. Eliot's incorporation into *Orígenes*.

References to St. John are thus crucial as Lezama and Rodríguez Feo sketch a model for the general aesthetics of *Orígenes*. In general, the *origenistas* ground art in sacred and secular traditions while simultaneously asserting its essential freedom to explore multiple creative avenues. For Lezama, this freedom is fairly radical, while other *origenistas* put forth a somewhat more restrictive definition of the artist's role, as we will examine below. Nonetheless, the *origenistas'* work grows out of a kind of sacred humanism, religious in tone and substance, but centered always on human experiences of, and responses to, the created world. Lezama and Rodríguez Feo express this humanism forcefully: "Sabemos ya hoy que las esenciales cosas que nos mueven parten del hombre, surgen de él y después de trazar sus inquietantes aventuras, pueden regresar..." (Lezama and Rodríguez Feo 7) ("We know today that the essential things that move us come from man, emerge from him, and after tracing their restless adventures, they can return..."). This definition of what concerns the artist, taken in isolation, seems to exclude divine inspiration, as it is held that inspiration comes from human nature and human experience themselves. Yet, this seemingly hubristic stance must be seen in the context of Lezama's overarching religiosity, flexible and heterodox as it may be.

Vitier's essays "Nemosine: Datos para una poética" and "Poesía Como Fidelidad," published in *Orígenes* in 1948 and 1956, respectively, present a counterpoint to Lezama's fictionalizing tendency. In the two essays, Vitier employs a dialectical method that allows a more equal opposition between imagination and experience, and searches for a poetic synthesis that preserves a kind of experience that cannot be

subsumed by art. For Vitier, as for Lezama, poetry molds the raw materials of experience into new entities that assume ontological independence. He asserts that poetry tends toward a distillation of the multiplicity of experience into essential unities through the work of the shaping forces of poetic form. Nonetheless, he is forceful in asserting that these processes do not eliminate concrete experience: "...el testimonio de la poesía viene a decirnos que dentro de las leyes esenciales e inmutables de su reino, *la experiencia no puede ser borrada*, y aquí radica tal vez la causa última de su fascinación terrible" (Nemosine 36) ("...poetry's testimony comes to tell us that in the essential and immutable laws of its realm, *experience cannot be erased*, and from here perhaps the ultimate cause of its terrible fascination is rooted").

He agrees with Lezama that the boundary between art and life is fluid, and that the image is the medium through which we make sense of our world: "La poesía es espejo de la vida, pero a su vez ella misma es vida. En la primera dimensión, es aquel plano expresivo donde la vida se vuelve imagen" (Fidelidad 21) ("Poetry is the mirror of life, but at the same time it is, in itself, life. In the first dimension, it is that expressive plane where life becomes image"). He goes beyond the notion of art as clear reflection of an external reality, represented by the image of the mirror, to assert that it is a space in which experience makes itself visible to us as structured image ("donde la vida se vuelve imagen").

This assertion falls in line with Lezama's tendency to assert art's epistemological supremacy. Nonetheless, Vitier assigns much less freedom to the poet to produce new manifestations of received images. Whereas for Lezama, the poetic image is a joyful re-enactment of Genesis, for Vitier, it is a solemn revelation ("Fidelidad" 27). The poet's



task is to immerse herself in concrete experience while remaining alert to the moment at which the intersection between the planes of the worldly and the transcendent makes itself visible in a structured and striking image. The role of the poet is much more consonant with the demeanor of the mystic. The poet is more constrained; in contrast to the audacity that characterizes Lezama's description of the poet, Vitier identifies the essential virtues of the poet as obedience and faith:

La fidelidad a la vida debe conducirnos a la vida del espíritu, cuya plenitud no la hallamos en lo imaginario ni en lo especulativo, sino en la libertad del consentimiento, en la obediencia ... [e]l signo supremo del espíritu en el hombre no es la creación, que en él es siempre mediata, insuficiente y engañosa, sino la aceptación. (Fidelidad 28)

Fidelity to life should direct us to the life of the spirit, whose plenitude we do not find in the imaginary nor in the speculative, but rather in the freedom of consent, in obedience ... [t]he supreme sign of the spirit in man is not creation, which in him is always mediated, insufficient and deceiving, but rather, acceptance.

Here, we find a fundamental dissonance between Lezama's and Vitier's expressions of the sacred significance of art. As Vitier asserts that the plenitude of the spirit cannot be perfectly achieved through the autonomous activities of imagination and speculation, he affirms the artist's fundamental dependence on external revelation.

Furthermore, though Vitier's arguments run parallel to Lezama's in their description of the profound desire that infuses the creative act, he characterizes that desire quite differently. Lezama, as we have seen, ties his poetic thinking to a fundamental

emphasis on the body. As a result, his poetics takes on the characteristics of an erotics. For Lezama, the longing in the act of creation appears as an erotic drive, wherein creativity is understood as *potens*, as an aggressive and conquering impulse. Lezama's poetics, grounded in a transgressive emphasis on the body which he develops in part through his reading of St. John, is a language of copulation and procreation. Vitier considers this sexual notion of creative agency, and acknowledges the poet's desire to "penetrate" the physical and temporal world with the instruments of experience and memory, though he is careful to point out that the purpose of the act is to facilitate or "mediate" an instance of "germination," not to actively "propagate," as Lezama's language asserts (Nemosine 29).

The poet's role for Vitier is often a passive one, and his longing comes from the experience of waiting for the revelation of the essential truths he searches for:

...el poeta, cuya actividad misma la hemos contemplado como creación de su propio objeto, de su propio *objetivo*, se halla sin embargo normalmente en una actitud de signo pasivo y anhelante. Sin duda él no puede decidir, prever or proveer nada en ese estado... (40)

(...the poet, whose own activity we have contemplated as the creation of his own object, of his own *objective*, normally finds himself nonetheless in an attitude of a passive and longing sign. Doubtless, he cannot decide, anticipate, or provide anything in this state...)

Lezama would agree that the poet creates his own objective. On the other hand, he would never describe the poet as passive. In a stark contrast to the agency that infuses poetic

desire in Lezama's writing, Vitier imagines a desirous and receptive state, in which the poet waits for transcendence rather than enacting it himself. As Ben Heller explains, "God is the only true actor here [in Vitier's description of poetic inspiration]; the poet himself cannot will creation, he can only *desire* it and wait for it, like the prophet who clamors in the desert for the appearance of his Lord" (84).

For Vitier, the poetic image does not achieve a total separation from the individual's experience of the world; instead it expresses a longing for transcendence that itself reflects the poetic subjectivity's continuing existence in the concrete world. This longing is part of what Vitier calls "[el] trascender angustioso" (Nemosine 34) ("anguished transcendence"), an act of reaching beyond multiplicity and physicality that is driven and indelibly marked by those very conditions. There is anguish in the act of poetic creation because the worldly body asserts its presence in spite of the soul's lofty ambitions. The medium of poetic language itself encompasses this dialectic, as it expresses spiritual truths, without ceasing to be a sensuous medium (36). Clearly, Vitier is in dialogue with St. John's mysticism, with its emphasis on the painful discipline that must precede an apprehension of the Divine. Yet, Vitier's discourse lingers at the threshold between physical and spiritual modes of being, insisting, not on the total abandonment of the former for the latter, but rather on the experience of the divine's penetration of the physical plane. The worldly and the spiritual are not separated by a line, but rather overlap in a zone occupied by the poetic imagination.

Vitier's poems offer many examples of his concept of anguished transcendence. The desire to apprehend the spiritual essence of experience is perhaps immediately obvious to the reader, but it is important to note the dialectical opposite of this desire,

which contributes to the synthesis of the transcendent and the worldly for Vitier. This other tendency can be observed where the speaker enacts a reaching out and a longing for contact with a concrete reality. It is a kind of longing for deeper immersion in the natural world, the sympathetic reverse of the desire for transcendence. Vitier asserts in “Poesía Como Fidelidad” that there is a “a Gongorian conception of things”<sup>16</sup> (“concepción gongorina de las cosas”) that counterbalances what he calls poetry’s “Cartesian” impulse. In this Gongorian mode, “the poet responds in his own way to the question: what are things?” (“el poeta a su modo responde a la pregunta: ¿qué son las cosas?”) (25).

Vitier, like Lezama, revises the mystic model of St. John of the Cross, but does so in a more cautious way. Vitier places more emphasis on sense experience, and allows the world of that experience an important role in the project of apprehending the transcendent. He rejects the mystic process of emptying the senses and asserts that revelation can take on concrete form. Nonetheless, the broader outlines of Vitier’s poetic methodology are more faithful to St. John’s example by emphasizing an essential passivity on the part of the poet, who must await revelation. The basic stance of the poet is similar to that of the mystic in the longing inherent in the poet’s passive state and in the “anguish” that the poet must experience as a sensory being as he strives toward contact with the divine.

### **The Atheistic Counterpoint**

In spite of differing methodologies, Lezama and Vitier, like the majority of the *origenistas*, build their aesthetics on individual versions of Catholic faith. Though Virgilio Piñera did not publish a large body of work in *Orígenes*, the work that does

appear there, especially his play *Falsa alarma* and his essay on Kafka, forms a notable philosophical and aesthetic counterpoint to Lezama and Vitier's work. In her study of his dramatic work, Raquel Aguilú de Murphy observes that for Piñera, the workings of the Cuban social sphere prior to the Revolution served as models of the literary construction of the absurd (9). To the extent that his evocation of individual alienation in the social world springs from observations of the nation's ills, Piñera's work emerges from the same basic impulses as that of other *origenistas*. Like them, he participates in the project of employing literature toward ontological ends, as his work seeks to probe the essences of human experiences of the social and political world.

The important difference, though, is that Piñera's work, rather than reaching for renewal through spiritual insight, simply lays out a pathology of the human soul. The public absurdity that for Lezama or Vitier can be opposed and redeemed through private works of creation is for Piñera inherent in all human relationships and as such is unredeemable. In "La otra desintegración," Lezama and Rodríguez Feo assert that art must go beyond a dissection of the nation's body that lays bare its diseases toward the discovery of cures. Their diagnosis is that the State suffers from a lack of imagination, the kind of imagination that Martí evidenced in the era of Cuban independence. Thus, "...its remedy will have to spring from creation and from the image" ("...su remedio tendrá que brotar de creación y de imagen") (60). Art that describes society's problems while offering no solutions is a pitfall to be avoided; it is essential "...not to fall into the crude manichaenism of marking evil and the way of the Malign One..." ("...no caer en el burdo maniqueísmo de señalar el mal y el paso del Maligno...") (60).

Perhaps the “manichaenism” Lezama and Rodríguez Feo describe refers in part to Piñera’s work. “La otra desintegración” does not appear under a name, but rather appears under the heading “Señales,” which designated pieces that one must assume were co-authored by the two editors. The rhetoric of this passage sounds like Lezama’s, so we see a clear dialogue between the more optimistic, or “joyful” poet and the skeptical Piñera. Rodríguez-Feo was more sympathetic to Piñera’s concerns, and his supposed participation in the essay’s production raises another point of ambiguity or dissonance.

Piñera stood out among his fellow *origenistas* not simply because his work lacked what Lezama and Rodríguez Feo call a sense of “projection” toward creative redemption, but also because his work showed no religious foundation that might imply the necessity of that redemption, as it did for so many other *origenistas*. If for Lezama and Vitier, poetry is, respectively, an act of sacred re-creation or contemplative faith, for Piñera, literature expresses the essential solitude of humankind in the universe and the impossibility of redemption. Profoundly influenced by Sartre and Artaud’s notion of the theater of cruelty, the world that surrounds the characters of Piñera’s plays and stories is a dreary monolith of strained social relationships structured by the opposite poles of oppression and isolation. There is no exit from this frightening binary, no third space of human creation punctuated by the sacred where the possibility of redemption can be ascertained (as for Vitier) or invented (as for Lezama).

Finally, in his essay “El secreto de Kafka,” published in *Orígenes* in 1945, Piñera presents another point of discrepancy with the majority position of his group, in adopting a stance that devalues what Lezama and Rodríguez Feo call the humanist foundation of art. Piñera asserts that the essential and enduring value of Kafka’s work does not lie in its

investigations of human experience, but rather in the constant surprises of his technique; indeed, in the first sentence of his essay he states firmly that Kafka "...is nothing other than a man of letters" ("...no es otra cosa que un literato") (42). His praise of Kafka's work severs ties between the literary and the humanistic, and focuses all attention on the former. The value that Piñera ascribes to Kafka's work is summed up in two terms he repeats many times over the course of his short essay: "la invención" and "la sorpresa" ("invention" and "surprise"). These values reveal Piñera's aesthetic connection to the *vanguardia*, a fact that, in itself, establishes a critical distance between his poetics and the aesthetic projects outlined in the programmatic statements of *Orígenes'* editors.

His insistence on these categories as essential sources of value in a body of literary work runs up against Lezama and Rodríguez Feo's critique of avant garde aesthetics in the first issue of *Orígenes*, where the coeditors critique "superficial mutations" of literary form (5). If the dominant rhetoric of *origenismo* privileges epistemological innovation, Piñera's essay on Kafka foregrounds instead the formal surface of the text, privileging innovation that produces reactions of delight and surprise.

Thus we see in "El secreto de Kafka," not the revelation of a secret about the writer's work, but rather a schematization according to *vanguardista* formal values. Piñera's reduction of Kafka's work to technical rather than conceptual values is surprising when one takes into account the depth of the author's influence on a text like Piñera's play *Falsa alarma*. The play's opening scenario—the interrogation of the main character by a judge bent on proving his guilt by whatever machination possible—reminds the reader of Kafka's somber explorations of the inexplicable and inaccessible nature of the Law. So why would Piñera do such violence to the philosophical

foundation of Kafka's work in an essay meant to praise him? Perhaps it is the scriptural foundation of the notion of Law put forth in his fiction that is for Piñera a false basis for an investigation of human predicaments. Even formal aspects of Kafka's work with Biblical influences, like his adaptation of parabolic structures in his short fiction, characteristics Piñera does not mention, might represent too much of a reliance on a tradition the Cuban author saw as invalid.

Piñera's skepticism and vision of art as *techné* divorced from humanistic imperatives make him stand out as a foil that focuses, through opposition, the general coherence of agenda among other *orígenistas*. The majority position of *Orígenes* conflicts with Piñera's skepticism. Instead of Piñera's valorization of formal innovation, the journal emphasizes innovations of humanistic knowledge. And, in conflict with the absence of any kind of transcendent order in Piñera's work, most *orígenistas* affirm their own personal vision of a Christian basis for art.

### **José Rodríguez Feo: Translation as Expression of the *Orígenes* Project**

To this point, we have described the aesthetic, philosophical, religious and political foundations of *Orígenes* by way of explications of the ideas of Lezama and Vitier, allowing for the dissonant assertions of Virgilio Piñera. These three writers are central to the counterpoints that inflect the magazine's ideology. José Rodríguez Feo is not included in this group, as his work does not contribute foundational concepts in the same way. It is important nonetheless to highlight the role of coeditor José Rodríguez Feo alongside these writers, because his work as editor, translator and essayist played the most important role in establishing *Orígenes*'s transnational intertextuality, facilitating



connections among the multifaceted conceptual bases of *Orígenes* and the assertions and assumptions of foreign texts and traditions. If other authors represent the magazine's basic suppositions, Rodríguez Feo is the one who facilitates the dialogue between those and other, radically different notions of the nature and function of literature.

As we will see in the central chapters of this study, Rodríguez Feo's work has two contrasting effects on the development of *Orígenes* as a grouping of explicit and implicit assertions about the proper role of literature in society. First, we can observe moments in which his choice of texts by foreign authors, the correspondence he maintains with them, and the translations of their work, represent a continuation of different aspects of the central *Orígenes* ideologies. For example, by soliciting two of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, Rodríguez Feo seeks to bolster the journal's basis in a spiritual conception of literature's existence and relevance in society. In the case of his correspondence with Wallace Stevens, we find many moments in which the Cuban editor defends the religiosity and internationalism of *Orígenes* against the American poet's skepticism about both of those tendencies. Finally, at many moments in his translations, Rodríguez Feo makes interventions into foreign texts in order to process and digest them for incorporation into the broader projects of his magazine.

In contrast to all of these activities, which have the effect of preserving certain established tenets of *origenismo*, Rodríguez Feo at times plays the role of introducing dissonances and counterpoints into the discursive space of the journal. By publishing Allen Tate's "The New Provincialism," Rodríguez Feo introduces a number of ideas—regionalism, a sociological-empirical basis for literature—that conflict with the magazine's basic conceptions into its very textual body. Also, Rodríguez Feo facilitates

the expression of Stevens's notions of empiricism and atheist fictionalism in *Orígenes*, despite the philosophical tensions that result.

In addition to these conflictive or contrapuntal aspects of Rodríguez Feo's role in *Orígenes*, we will come to see something largely ignored by previous scholarly work—Rodríguez Feo's critical and expository essays. In these essays, we find a developing intellectual agenda that emphasizes concrete historical analysis of literature and its contextual significance, in contrast to Lezama's conception of the poetic image's temporal and spatial fluidity. Rodríguez Feo the essayist introduces a materialist perspective on cultural phenomena, especially in his analysis of U.S. history. As a result, he deploys a strain of thought in *Orígenes* that supports a concrete and engaged anti-imperialism and hints at Marxist convictions, in stark contrast to the explicit *origenista* project of circumventing demands for political engagement. Furthermore, as we have already seen, Rodríguez Feo deploys a concept of Protestant culture that is based on historical and sociological analysis. This concept, in turn, shapes the journal's encounters with North American authors.

As we study the transnational nexuses Rodríguez Feo establishes within *Orígenes*, we will gain a fuller appreciation of his role in developing and nuancing the journal's projects. We will be attentive to each of his roles—editor, correspondent, translator, and essayist—in order to fully appreciate the varied means by which Rodríguez Feo's shaping of *origenismo* occurs.

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## Notes to Chapter One

<sup>1</sup> For the most useful political and historical contextualization of *Orígenes*, see Barquet, *Consagración de la Habana*. For an analysis of the ethical dimensions of the journal and its group identity, see Arcos, *Orígenes: la pobreza irradiante*. Bejel and Heller offer the most accessible introductions to the complex poetry and poetics of Lezama. Further, Heller's analysis places Lezama's poetics in dialogue with Vitier's in an illuminating way. Pellón's work on Lezama's prose is also very helpful in gaining a general sense of the author's literary thought. For the best work on Vitier's life and work, see Díaz Quiñones and Saíenz.

<sup>2</sup> In these texts, Piñera accuses Lezama of settling into a comfortable pattern of poetic repetition, asserting that he fails to subject himself to the rigors of formal evolution (Prats Sariol 42).

<sup>3</sup> A heated personal dispute between Spanish poets Juan Ramón Jiménez and Jorge Guillén, played out in the pages of *Orígenes*, precipitated the dissolution. Lezama defended Jiménez, a central influence on his work, and Rodríguez Feo was furious with Lezama for publishing Jiménez's response ("Crítica paralela") to an attack by Guillén ("Epigramas"). Roberto Pérez León gives a detailed account of the entire melee in *Tiempo de ciclón* (9-24).

<sup>4</sup> Some scholars have asserted that this agenda is shaped in part by a fundamental insecurity, on the part of the cultural elites, about their real relevance in national debates.

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Rosalie Sitman, in reference to the response of the Argentine magazine *Sur* to the political upheaval of the nation in the late 1930s, asserts: "...en la tradición europea la voz de los intelectuales repercutía por los corredores de la política con el prestigio y la autoridad moral conferidos por el ejemplo de un escritor como Zola, erguido como conciencia ética de la nación, mientras que en la periferia americana, y más en la Argentina, donde las relaciones entre los intelectuales y el poder político eran bastante precarias, apenas se escuchaba el eco en la caja de resonancia de la conciencia nacional.” (97) (“...in the European tradition the voice of the intellectuals reverberated in the halls of politics with the prestige and the moral authority conferred upon a writer like Zola, who was lifted up as the ethical conscience of the nation, while at the American periphery, and even more in Argentina, where the relations between intellectuals and political power were fairly precarious, there was hardly an echo heard in the sound box of the national consciousness.”)

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the genesis of the *Sur* project, see Sitman, 73-87.

<sup>6</sup> This majority, it is important to remember, is a fluid one that at times excludes figures like Virgilio Piñera and Lorenzo García Vega, and also includes a liminal figure, José Rodríguez Feo, who participated in the articulation of this agenda while at the same time cultivating an interest in the techniques and concerns of the *vanguardistas*. As we will see, many of the programmatic texts that articulate the magazine’s antivanguard orientation were co-authored by its two editors. These texts are infused with Lezama’s characteristically exuberant metaphorical style, suggesting that Rodríguez-Feo’s role in their production was secondary. Thus, it is a matter of debate to what extent the younger

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editor agreed with their assertions. We must look to his other work, especially his translations and his critical essays, for hints as to where he stood on the issue of avant-garde aesthetics.

<sup>7</sup> The ethical and political outlook of the *origenistas* bears many similarities to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the significance of "minor" literatures. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that any minor literature is inevitably political, no matter what its concern (17). Further, they assert that every individual expression in a minor literature "takes on a collective value ...[i]t is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism" (17). The idea of the individual enunciation's inevitable relation to a collective expression is a crucial tenet of *origenismo*, a concept with poetic, political and religious origins. Nonetheless, in radically challenging individual subjectivity, Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of the implications of collective enunciation goes further than the thinking of the *origenistas*: "There isn't a subject; *there are only collective assemblages of enunciation...*" (18).

<sup>8</sup> *La expresión americana*, where this essay is published, appeared in 1957, three years after the editors parted ways and a year after *Orígenes* ceased publication. Nonetheless, Lezama was working on these essays during the *Orígenes* years and they reflect a synthesis of the same central concerns that appear in his essays published in the magazine, though they are framed somewhat differently.

<sup>9</sup> Doris Sommer asserts that the belief "...that literature has the capacity to intervene in history, to help construct it" (78) is a characteristic trait of Latin American literature. This is of course a generalization that needs to be tested. Nonetheless, the

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evidence that Sommer marshals to support her assertion, namely such “foundational fictions” as José de Alencar’s *Iracema* (1865) and Rómulo Gallegos’s *Doña Bárbara* (1929), is convincing. These novels clearly stage dramas or “romances” of national identity, hoping to reshape the national consciousness of questions of race, ethnicity and class in order to facilitate the positing of a unifying national identity.

<sup>10</sup> Alessandra Riccio discusses the communal ethic of *Orígenes* in her essay “Los años de ‘Orígenes.’” She mentions the subterranean rifts that were sometimes visible in spite of the unifying intent behind the ceremoniality of the *origenistas* (32-33).

<sup>11</sup> In a retrospective description of the religiosity of the *origenistas*, Cintio Vitier emphasizes both the Catholicism and the catholicity of *Orígenes* (Para llegar 71-72).

<sup>12</sup> The thesis of Smith’s survey of mysticism in Eastern and Western traditions is that the mystic represents the most authentic expression of “...the most vital element in all true religions, rising up in revolt against cold formality and religious torpor.” (3). This assertion, which refutes the claims to primacy of the scholastic or ecclesiastic mechanisms of religious traditions, is common in studies of mysticism.

<sup>13</sup> St. John was imprisoned by members of his own order. There is some evidence that the Inquisition was suspicious of his work (R. Williams 172).

<sup>14</sup> Two of St. John’s texts subsequently appeared in *Clavileño* in 1943: “Aviso espiritual” and “De cómo la fé es noche oscura para el alma.” *Nadie parecía* opens its first issue in 1942 with verses from St. John, and included texts by Lezama, Gaztelu, and Ignacio Blain Moyúa that were inspired by the mystic’s poetry and theology.

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<sup>15</sup> Rodríguez Feo comments to Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon, in a letter from February 1, 1947, that Schorer's is "a fine study," though the Cuban scholar "...found Mr. Schorer's argument too loosely contoured, too many repetitions, etc."

<sup>16</sup> Here, Vitier refers to the Spanish baroque poet Luis de Góngora (1561-1627), and goes on to attribute the originality and importance of his work in part to the pure "gaze" uncontaminated by restricting preconceptions, and ranging across all the variegations of a multiple concrete reality.

## Chapter Two

### **Discovering Life and Abstracting Experience: The Literary Exchanges of Wallace Stevens and José Rodríguez Feo**

The textual interaction between Wallace Stevens and José Rodríguez Feo is the best-documented of the North-South encounters staged in *Orígenes*. A crucial contribution to the small body of critical work on the topic is *Secretaries of the Moon: The Letters of Wallace Stevens and José Rodríguez Feo*, published in 1986 with an introduction by Beverley Coyle and Alan Filreis. Subsequent to the appearance of this volume, scholars can not only examine the essay and five poems by Stevens that appeared in the magazine, but also contextualize their readings of those translated texts in an extensive and dense personal correspondence.<sup>1</sup> Taking a roughly chronological perspective on the unfolding of the textual dialogue carried out between the two, one can see how the letters, the poems and the essay form part of a coherent and extended conversation about the proper sources and functions of literature and of art generally. The dialogic nature of the correspondence is not a separate backdrop to isolated literary texts contributed to the magazine, nor is the translation of those texts a mechanical aspect of the interaction with limited conceptual relevance. Instead, I will try to demonstrate that each of these elements, along with the poems and essay, are part of a continuous textual dialogue.

Before beginning to narrate the unfolding of the dialogue between Wallace Stevens and José Rodríguez Feo, I wish to make clear the methodological foundations of my readings. I will first address some of the obfuscations caused by reading Stevens's



engagement with Cuban culture as exoticist, in order to clear the way for a more detailed analysis of what is actually communicated in the letters, poems, essays and translations. This communication must be considered in a dialogic context that places the assertions of each interlocutor on an equal footing, rather than from a monologic perspective that emphasizes Stevens's role in the conversation. Then, I will proceed to an analysis of the complex counterpoints that emerge from this conversation.

### **The Politics and Epistemology of Exoticism**

In his essay “Wallace Stevens y el discurso en La Habana: palabras de José Rodríguez Feo,” Roberto Ignacio Díaz analyzes the textual relationship between the two authors as a negotiation of exoticist discourses. Díaz perceives in Stevens's comments and questions to Rodríguez Feo a particular agenda—to use the young Cuban as a source of exotic details about a strange and unknown tropical place. Díaz draws on an essential Todorovian principle of exoticism in his critique of Stevens. For Todorov, the exoticist's way of describing the Other is determined by the Other's opposition to the exoticist's cultural characteristics (264).<sup>2</sup> Díaz asserts that Stevens is interested in *Orígenes* insofar as it contrasts with the familiar: “*Orígenes* le interesa sobre todo como espécimen de un curioso mundo nuevo; su lectura y sus consejos tratarán de acentuar tangiblemente las diferencias que pueda ofrecer esa revista de un país extraño...” (5) (“*Orígenes* interests him above all as a specimen of a curious new world; his readings and his advice will attempt to tangibly emphasize the differences that that magazine from a strange world can offer...”). The exoticist idealizes the Other, without realizing that he lacks the epistemological tools to truly understand him. For this reason, Todorov asserts:

“Knowledge is incompatible with exoticism, but lack of knowledge is in turn irreconcilable with praise of others; yet praise without knowledge is precisely what exoticism aspires to be. This is its constitutive paradox” (265).

For Díaz, a “tacit hierarchy” (“la tácita jerarquía”) structures the Stevens-Rodríguez Feo exchange (6). In this hierarchy, Stevens is the towering literary figure from a culture and literary tradition enjoying centrality on the world stage, whereas Rodríguez Feo “...addresses the poet, looking for submissions for a magazine that was just founded in a city associated with many things, but not with high culture. Stevens writes from a tradition that already occupied a key position in Western culture; Rodríguez Feo, on the other hand, pertains to a marginal, little-known tradition” (“...se dirige al poeta en busca de colaboraciones para una revista que acaba de fundar en una ciudad asociada con muchas cosas, pero no con la alta cultura. Stevens escribe desde una tradición que ya ocupaba un puesto clave dentro de la cultura occidental; Rodríguez Feo, en cambio, pertenece a una tradición marginal, mal conocida”) (4-5).

In Díaz’s analysis, the positions from which the two correspondents address each other represent a clear global political opposition of superiority and inferiority. This interpretive move facilitates a reading of the correspondence that characterizes it as a series of exoticist incursions on the part of Stevens and receptive or resistant responses by Rodríguez Feo. The power dynamic that Díaz portrays determines his evaluation of the exchanges’ implications and results in a simplification of the complexity of the two writers’ interactions. Because Díaz’s interpretive model places Stevens in a position of cultural power over Rodríguez Feo, Díaz takes each of the U.S. poet’s assertions to be patronizing or dismissive.

I wish to revise Díaz's emphasis on power dynamics that I believe are not entirely relevant to the literary issues raised in the dialogue. The kind of power an author wields as a result of global-political, economic and cultural centrality may not be an advantage in the textual negotiation of issues such as the proper materials of poetry and the ideal makeup of a literary magazine. Despite Díaz's cynical remark about Havana's global cultural status, both interlocutors are operating within the highly exclusive space of high culture, one less intersected by global economics than are, for example, the arenas of popular culture—television dramas, magazine advertising and the like. Relationships of high cultural production and consumption do not fit so easily into the pattern of economic and ideological hegemony that structures the majority of transfers or translations between global unequals. In addition to the cultural register at which its meanings operate, the basic economic self-sufficiency of a magazine like *Orígenes* frees it to a certain extent from the global networks of economic power that structure other kinds of cultural exchanges.

A more significant advantage is held by the editors of the magazine and its most frequent contributors. The fact that Rodríguez Feo, Lezama, and rest of the *origenistas* determine what the nature of the magazine is and how it will receive foreign texts is more significant than Cuba's vulnerable economic position in relation to the U.S. The activity of translation, which is central to the active reception of foreign texts, plays a significant role in this other kind of cultural power dynamic, lending a significant amount of agency to the receivers. As I will argue later, Wallace Stevens himself evidences an awareness of the significance of the editor's labor and of the centrality of translation in this cultural

interchange, and is interested in seeing the process of translation reshape and recast his work for reception in a new context.

As I hope to demonstrate, there is an explicit as well as an implicit agenda behind Stevens's interactions with Rodríguez Feo and his contributions to *Orígenes*. His explicit agenda is positing and problematizing the idea of the primacy of empirical experience in the construction of poetic images. Stevens persistently argues for a realist foundation for poetry, though, as we will see, Stevens approaches this issue critically. First, he asserts the important interrelations between the imaginative and the empirical faculties. Second, he questions the authenticity of the materials that are available to us as "real experience."

The implicit agenda becomes clear when we analyze Stevens's assertions *in their dialogic context*, rather than from the point of view of a single-author study. When we look at these assertions as part of a conversation with Rodríguez Feo (and, less directly, with the cultural agenda of the magazine he coedits), we see Stevens's interest in eliciting responses. Stevens is less interested in being admired from afar, or in being canonized in another language, than he is in seeing the reverberations and echoes that his assertions create in a transcultural dialogue. This is not to deny Stevens his considerable cultural prejudices and ignorances. But it is crucial to recognize that Stevens rarely seeks to impose viewpoints on Rodríguez Feo or to be treated with uncritical deference by him or other Cuban readers, editors and translators. Instead, he hopes to construct counterpoints, clarify oppositions, and rework his own arguments in response to his interlocutor.

The dialogue Stevens sustains with *Orígenes* is thus another form of the imaginary encounter with a cultural Other that structures much of his poetry. In these imaginary encounters, the possibility of a new and productive engagement with reality is

posed. The journey to the foreign land promises, at the outset, the sloughing off of domestic meaning systems in preparation for empirical experience. Yet, in Stevens's poems, the authenticity of these experiences is questioned. The imaginary contact with the Other is posed in a self-reflective, nuanced, tentative, and epistemologically critical way.

"The Comedian as the Letter C" (1923) is an example of these characteristics. The poem narrates an epic journey that promises an escape from the stale, domesticated imagery of a European landscape. The quest for the discovery of an exuberant, untamed and untroped Nature is framed in terms of the hero's desire for a natural reality that is wholly other. Crispin exemplifies Todorov's definition of the exoticist, as the encounter he hopes to have with the foreign is inevitably posed as a dialectical opposite to the domestic. Further, Crispin's encounter with a foreign reality is structured by a lack, and the image of the Other that emerges is distorted in various ways by the desire that impels the subject toward the encounter. Yet we must not confuse Stevens with the speaker of his poem; Crispin's agenda is portrayed as a comic failure. A careful reading of the poem helps us understand Stevens's cynicism about just the kind of exoticist agenda of which Díaz accuses the poet.

"Academic Discourse at Havana" (1929)<sup>3</sup> is another poem that resists Díaz's characterization of Stevens as exoticist. The poem poses a journey to the Cuban capital as the search for a "difference" (3)<sup>4</sup> from the worn-out mythologies of Romanticism (evoked in the image of the nightingale (3)) and Christianity (evoked by references to "Jehovah and the great sea-worm" (4)). The imaginary locale he subsequently enters provides a particular kind of exoticism; it is radically *different* in a way that sets the stage

for the speaker's pronouncement of the death of old symbols and the subsequent inauguration of a new realism. The imagistic landscape of the poem is a scene of death and destruction, the locus of a project of clearing away symbolic detritus. If "The Comedian as the Letter C" enacts a parodic dismantling of a colonialist realism, "Academic Discourse in Havana" broaches the subject of realism again, reasserting Crispin's concern with escaping the symbols of a worn-out culture. Still, the realism of the latter poem is not a stagnant one, like Crispin's. The speaker poses his new aesthetics as a tentative one that will be subject to future redefinitions. The journey to Havana in the poem does not fit the definition of the exoticist encounter.

An understanding of the nuanced journeys toward difference staged in "The Comedian as the Letter C" and "Academic Discourse at Havana" must serve as the foundation for our examination of the cross-cultural encounter between Stevens and *Orígenes*. For Todorov, an essential naiveté drives the exoticist project, wherein the viewer does not realize his own ignorance of the reality of the culture he encounters. This definition of exoticism is inherent in Díaz's critique of Stevens. Yet Stevens's poetry, beginning in its earliest stages, calls forth the exotic locale as the setting for an investigation of epistemological and poetic questions rather than the scene for an indulgence in the flatteries of exoticism. Stevens practices a *critical exoticism* like the one Roger Célestin investigates in his readings of Montaigne, Flaubert, Naipaul and others, a "...positing and elaboration of a (beckoning) *outside* (in texts that in fact constitute *returns*), that lends itself to a questioning of the basis and workings of representation itself..." (4).

In dialogue with Stevens, Rodríguez Feo asserts his own agenda, as we will see. While he often agrees with his correspondent (on the weakness of propagandistic art, or the importance of “ordinary experience” to one’s intellectual development), he responds independently to Stevens’s assertions at every turn. One method he employs is the evasive or laconic response to statements he does not agree with. Another is the presentation of contrapuntal assertions, which is often executed through textual allusion or through translational interventions into Stevens’s poems and essays. If Stevens’s argumentative stance is authorial, Rodríguez Feo’s is readerly and translational. For this reason, it is important to be alert to the implications of Rodríguez Feo’s citations, and to the implications of his translation choices.

Through these strategies, Rodríguez Feo repeatedly asserts oppositions to Stevens’s positions. In response to Stevens’s empiricism, Rodríguez Feo asserts himself as a “Platonist.” He contravenes the U.S. poet’s rejection of the importance of reading with the assertion of a scholarly agenda. Finally, he responds to Stevens’s rejection of religion as an intellectual basis for the arts with expressions of interest in Spanish mysticism.

### **Opening Gestures: “Esthétique du Mal” and the Beginning of a Conversation**

In his undergraduate studies at Harvard, Rodríguez Feo attempted translations of a number of poems from Stevens’s first major collection, *Harmonium* (1931), as well as of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” (1942). In the first letter we have from Rodríguez Feo to Stevens, dated November 30, 1944, the young Cuban scholar, recently turned

coeditor of a promising new literary journal, proposes publishing a translation of “Esthétique du Mal,” a poem that had just appeared in the *Kenyon Review*.

There are two levels, one personal, the other literary, on which Rodríguez Feo initiates a personal and intellectual engagement with Stevens in this letter. He signs off with a flattering quotation from the poem, as a way of forging a rapport with the older poet, and as a means of beginning a substantive dialogue on Stevens’s poetics: “Allow me this opportunity, now, to wish you the happy greetings for Christmas. And pardon such naïve familiarity. Indeed, I feel I know you quite well already. And if I have hesitated so long to address you, it is because ‘this is a part of the sublime from which we shrink’” (Secretaries 33-34). On a personal level, the quotation asserts the sublime nature of Stevens the man and his work, implying that both are of monumental stature, constituting an overwhelming and intimidating force. On a literary level, Rodríguez Feo is up to something more subtle: he takes up Stevens’s use of the concept of the sublime as a topic of discussion.

In the poem, the sublime as idea plays a negative role. The speaker counterposes the idea to the brute physical reality to which it normally refers. A young traveler in Naples sits in a café, “...reading paragraphs/ On the sublime...” (1.2-3). The speaker of the poem juxtaposes the traveler’s interest in an abstract concept with the real danger of Mount Vesuvius, which leans threateningly over the scene. The speaker parodies the reader’s abstracted state of mind by suggesting that

...Vesuvius might consume

In solid fire the utmost earth and know

No pain (ignoring the cocks that crow us up



To die). This is a part of the sublime

From which we shrink. (1.16-20)

The young man's absorption by a theoretical discussion of the sublime appears ridiculous in relation to the image of physical danger that looms over the scene. The speaker asserts implicitly that the sublime confuses the objective and the subjective, because its theorization of a particular aesthetic experience posits an overwhelming physical presence in strict relation to a human subjectivity. The poem thus confronts the anthropomorphism that is constitutive of the sublime.

Stevens stages the poem to illustrate how the abstraction of a physical reality neutralizes its disruptive force, taking an experience that previously broached the limits of the human capacity to assimilate and process sensory data and making it assimilable. If, contrary to this operation of conceptual containment, the concrete potential of the volcano were allowed to rupture its theoretical frame and reassert its primacy, we would "shrink" from it. The speaker of the poem attacks the projection of the human onto the natural as he asserts that Vesuvius might reap great human destruction while displaying no human emotion. The natural, when its momentous power is meditated upon, explodes the compressed frame of human subjectivity, and assumes its proper extra-human scale.

The image of the volcano prefigures a warning that occurs near the poem's end: "The greatest poverty is not to live/ In a physical world, to feel that one's desire/ Is too difficult to tell from despair" (15.1-3). Desire, in this context, is the desire for sense experience. In an abstracted frame of mind, this desire is fruitless, as no clear access to concrete experience is allowed. It thus becomes confused with its inevitable outcome—

despair. The speaker implicitly revalorizes this kind of desire as a force that might propel the subjectivity beyond its binding solipsism.

It is significant that Rodríguez Feo responds to this particular poem and initiates a dialogue with Stevens with a citation from it. It is likely the young Cuban intellectual recognizes something of himself in the reader that appears at its opening. Throughout his textual conversations with the older poet, Rodríguez Feo assumes the role of the insatiable reader seated at the café, drawing greater inspiration from textuality than from reality. We see him playing this part at the very initiation of his correspondence with Stevens. In a significant discursive move, he reverses the argumentative direction of Stevens's discourse on the sublime. When he asserts that Stevens's body of poetic work, rather than a natural phenomenon, forms "a part of the sublime from which we shrink," he retextualizes the poet's image of the extratextual reality that lies outside the space of the theoretical. The sublime returns to being a literary phenomenon. This move asserts the primacy of the literary over the real, and is executed through a tribute to the poet's work. As such, Rodríguez Feo seeks to establish a rapport and enter into a sympathetic dialogue with Stevens while simultaneously claiming his right to contest the assertions he finds in the poet's work.

The dialogic nature of Stevens's metapoetics mirrors the contestatory space Rodríguez Feo opens up in his initiation of the dialogue. Stevens's assertion of the primacy of concrete reality is only one argumentative move in a broader oscillation between issues of objectivity and subjectivity in his poetry. Rodríguez Feo, as careful and active reader of "Esthétique," sees an opening for discussion with the poet, rather than a rigid stance he must reject. We see this opening at the end of the poem, as the

speaker grudgingly accepts that the human reflex to subjectively restructure concrete experience is as essential as the experience itself:

And out of what one sees and hears and out  
Of what one feels, who could have thought to make  
So many selves, so many sensuous worlds  
As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming  
With the metaphysical changes that occur,  
Merely in living as and where we live. (15.19-24)

Surprisingly, the same poet who so expertly stages a parodic dismantlement of subjective projection evokes its beautiful reconstruction. The “mid-day air,” as physical presence, is retroped in a process that the speaker accepts as natural and inevitable—the “metaphysical changes” in the physical element emerge naturally from human habitation of that space. The fact that the subjective projection is enacted, in part, “out of what one sees and hears” marks the persistence of an argument for an empirical basis for the imagination’s “metaphysical changes,” in contrast to the inevitable emotional impulse (“what one feels”) behind the projection (what we can call the pathetic fallacy). As we will see in the correspondence, Stevens’s periodic shifts of emphasis between the poles of the objective and the subjective often produce the kind of delicate reconciliation that we find at the closing of “Esthétique.”

**Continuing a Dialogue through Poetic Means: “A Word with José Rodríguez-Feo”  
and “Paisant Chronicle”**

Stevens's reply to Rodríguez Feo's overture, though brief, is positive, expressing a willingness to allow "Esthétique" to be translated and an interest in perusing an issue of *Orígenes*. Stevens receives a few issues of the magazine on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1945, and comments in a letter dated the next day that he is pleased with its presentation, though his Spanish is too limited to read the texts very thoroughly. As the correspondence develops, the two men discuss the work of George Santayana, Yvor Winters, and Ernest Hemingway. A relationship is established, and Rodríguez Feo feels comfortable, in a letter dated February 13, 1945, firing off a number of questions he has been struggling with, breathlessly ranging from Hemingway's machismo to Stevens's concept of "the major men," to the work of John Malcolm Brinnin and Robert Penn Warren, to the concept of the grotesque.

Stevens's reply takes poetic form, an event that will occur numerous times during the course of his textual conversation with Rodríguez Feo. As I will try to show, these poems cannot be fully appreciated in isolation, but instead must be read as elements in the ongoing dialogue between the two men. In response to Rodríguez Feo's question about the grotesque, Stevens replies with the poem "A Word with José Rodríguez-Feo," which appears in the spring, 1945 issue of the magazine *Voices*. The poem is part of a distinct mode of dialogic discourse on the basic questions of objectivity versus subjectivity and realism versus romanticism. This discourse emerges from and sustains the conversation unfolded in the letters.

Like "Academic Discourse at Havana," the poem evokes the Cuban capital, not as the setting for the indulgence of exoticism, but rather as a spectral zone where more abstract propositions are essayed. The scant concrete detail used to evoke the place is

more appropriate to the exploration of an epistemological problem than to the narration of an exotic encounter. The poem calls forth the concept of the grotesque in order to interrogate its relation to the question of subjectivity, in an operation similar to the one that opens “Esthétique.”

The image of the moon reappears, standing as an emblem of the imaginative. Rodríguez Feo, the passionate student, translator and editor of literature, is portrayed as one of the imagination’s “secretaries.” Though there is a gentle irony in the characterization, Rodríguez Feo nonetheless stands as a positive figure in the poem, as he represents an intelligent devotion to art rather than a mindless surrender to fancy: “As one of the secretaries of the moon,/ The queen of ignorance, you have deplored/ How she presides over imbeciles” (1-3). The “imbeciles” of the poem recognize the grotesque in nocturnal images, and ask: “...Is it because/ Night is the nature of man’s interior world?/ Is lunar Habana the Cuba of the self?” (4-6). The question proposes a conflation of sense experience and subjectivity. A chain of connections is posed—night, the grotesque, subjectivity—that traverses the boundary between the exterior and the interior.

Stevens explains to Rodríguez Feo in a letter that he means for the “interior world” of the poem to be associated with the concept of the subconscious (42). Stevens intends the imbeciles of the second strophe to espouse a psychoanalytic method for understanding the grotesque: “We must enter boldly that interior world/ To pick up relaxations of the known” (7-8). The adverb “boldly” is shaded with irony, as the project of probing the subconscious is not truly an adventure into an unknown territory, but rather a timid reformulation of “the known.” The probing of the subconscious merely illustrates a fundamental solipsism. What is already known “relax[es],” offers itself up to

new readings that can be easily “pick[ed] up,” rather than achieved through arduous labor. This process is not an engagement with the reality that lies beneath the experience of the grotesque. The grotesque simply becomes the occasion for a solipsism that deceptively poses itself as “bold” exploration. Like Crispin in “The Comedian as the Letter C,” the explorer of the unconscious will not discover anything new, but will simply be brought back to his own preconceptions.

The speaker reaches a verdict on the psychoanalytic method of the “imbeciles,” asserting that:

...The spirit tires,

It has, long since, grown tired, of such ideas.

It says there is an absolute grotesque.

There is a nature that is grotesque within

The boulevards of the generals. (13-17)

The speaker of the poem makes a transition from the parodic depiction of a solipsistic intellectual position to the definitive statement of an opposite stance: there is an objective reality that the term “grotesque” describes. It is to be found, not in the image of Havana that a subjectivity internalizes, but in the very substance of the city itself. This declaration poses the grotesque as an objective reality, rather than a projection.

Though this argument is made forcefully in the poem, an examination of its rhetorical formulation reveals attenuations. Generally, the ironic treatment of an argument, when unaccompanied by the affirmative statement of an opposing point of view, is more thoroughly deconstructive. This kind of irony deploys its tonal devices from an unmarked discursive space, attacking the structure of an argument from a

position whose precepts are left implicit. It is often impossible to specify with certainty what motivates the ironic stance, what broader argument it is intended to make. Thus, it is difficult to pose a challenging reply to the ironic gesture.

When an ironic characterization leads to an affirmative opposing statement, the general effect is less forcefully deconstructive, because the means of parodic representation reveal their philosophical foundations. This is indeed what Stevens allows to happen when he asserts “an absolute grotesque.” This assertion is open to criticism on any number of fronts, the most obvious being that it simply suppresses the epistemological problematics of subjectivity and objectivity that are embedded in the terminology. The fact that the speaker makes the affirmation illustrates that the purpose of the poem is not to arrive at an absolute statement or slogan for objectivity. Indeed, the fact that the assertion of “an absolute grotesque” is made by “the spirit” problematizes it from a philosophical perspective. The assertion is not disguised as an intellection, but instead, is explicitly posed as something *desired*, as a proposition emerging from an opposition. Again, as in “Esthétique,” objective reality appears as an object of subjective desire, thereby calling to question the possibility of unmediated access to that reality.

The second poem that Stevens writes in response to Rodríguez Feo is “Paisant Chronicle,” which appears with “A Word with José Rodríguez-Feo” in *Voices*. Stevens writes the poem in response to his correspondent’s request for a definition of “the major men” that figure in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” a poem that links the figure to the theme denoted in its title: “The major abstraction is the idea of man/ And major man is its exponent, abler/ In the abstract than in his singular” (“It Must Be Abstract” 10.1-3). The speaker of “Notes” explores the question of the necessity of both the abstraction (the

“Supreme Fiction”) and the Real. The image of the “major man” illustrates what the speaker of “Notes” later describes as the interdependence of the two elements (“It Must Change,” section IV). The “major man,” as *exponent* of abstraction, *puts forth* the abstraction in concrete form. The abstraction relies on concrete exposition; for its existence, it depends on its ability to reduce itself to an apprehensible form. Conversely, the concrete reality relies on the expansions and generalizations of abstraction in order to be meaningful.

In order to clarify his intention in the use of the figure of the “major men,” Stevens elaborates on his definition in “Paisant Chronicle”: “They are characters beyond/ Reality, composed thereof. They are/ The fictive man created out of men” (14-16). The need for a Supreme Fiction is implicit in the need to figure forth an abstract concept that describes the essence of human nature. The concept must fulfill the contradictory need to believe in a force that is both beyond, and reflective of, the human. The speaker proposes a means of arriving at that abstraction that is more grounded in empirical reality. The abstraction, in contrast to the subconscious grotesque that is parodied in “A Word with José Rodríguez-Feo,” is to be a composite of concrete instances, something “beyond/ Reality” *and* “composed thereof.” In order to be believable, the abstraction must take on a palpable specificity. Further, this specificity cannot be constructed from spent clichés, but must rather refashion itself from novel images. Thus, what the poem espouses is not a discarding of the imaginative projection, but rather the need for that projection to be periodically refigured.

“A Word,” in response to the issue of the grotesque, suggests the necessity of a kind of absolute realism, while admitting that it is “the spirit” that generates that



necessity. “Paisant Chronicle,” on the other hand, takes up the question of this desire via an image in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” It is clear from reading both “A Word” and “Paisant Chronicle” that Stevens asserts a necessary reciprocal relation between the objective and the subjective, rather than a programmatic espousal of one or the other conceptual pole as the basis for a poetics. As we will see, this reciprocal relation in Stevens’s thinking is dynamic; it is continually in a process whereby one opposite challenges the other, forcing it to revise itself. Rodríguez Feo, as poetic figure in the first poem, is valorized as an intelligent observer of this epistemological dynamic, despising a stagnant romanticism that fixes a single meaning in the archetypal image of the moon. This depiction mirrors Stevens’s respect for Rodríguez Feo the real man (as he knows him through his letters), a respect that drives Stevens’s strategy of maintaining an exploratory dialogue that both enriches, and is enriched by, poetic texts.

### **“Attention and Meditation” versus Platonic Intelligence: A Contrapuntal Discussion of Reading**

After the exchanges that culminate in the poems that appear in *Voices*, the conversation turns to questions of the proper materials for poetry, continuing an engagement with the basic issues of the objective versus the subjective and the concrete versus the abstract. In response to a request for his opinions on the work of Hemingway, Stevens replies with an assertion that he repeats in reference to various authors throughout the correspondence: “I don’t read him” (43). Stevens frequently asserts that he avoids reading too much literary work—critical or creative—because the effect of doing so would be detrimental to his own poetry. This assertion develops over the course

of the correspondence into a systematic rejection of textual sources for poetry, and Stevens instead advocates two fundamental activities: observation of the physical world and meditation upon observed and imagined images. Stevens confides that "...I read little or no fiction, and really read very much less of everything than most people. It is more interesting to sit round and look out of the window" (43). It would be mistaken to read the comment, provoked by Rodríguez Feo's question about Hemingway, as evidence of general malice, though there is, of course, a sharp edge to his remark. His description of the act of looking out a window is not simply a sarcastic jab. Instead, this seemingly inconsequential remark argues for an empirical basis for poetic creation over and above intertextuality.

This assertion is provoked by, and cuts against, Rodríguez Feo's unflagging passion for books. The young man's mind is endowed with a boundless scholarly curiosity, and is constantly formulating complex systems of connections among texts of widely varying cultural, historical, and poetic contexts. Stevens betrays a fundamental respect for this inclination, but is not convinced to change his own stance. He argues from the position of a poet rather than of a scholar. Furthermore, during the mid 1940s, Stevens is at a period in his career in which his poetic method involves an increasingly intense coordination of personal disciplines of observation and meditation, disciplines that exclude reading.

Stevens's disavowal of textual sources for poetry is not precisely a rejection of subjectivity, but rather a resistance of an intersubjectivity facilitated by intertextuality. The image that is taken from another poet's work is for Stevens something that has been abstracted twice. Stevens finds the use of such images to be problematic because, as it

continues from one text to another, it results in a process of increasing abstraction from observable reality. In “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” published in 1942, Stevens asserts: “The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real. When it adheres to the unreal and intensifies what is unreal, while its first effect may be extraordinary, that effect is the maximum effect that it will ever have” (Angel 6).<sup>5</sup> A poetic figure that the reader can “participate in” and which will sustain the greatest “vitality” (7) is one that animates an observed phenomenon. To continue to make fresh impressions on the minds of readers, poetry should enact periodic returns to personal experience of, and meditation upon, the materials of the observable world. Stevens does not reduce the ontological status of this image to one of pure objectivity; he is attentive in his comments to the constant interactions between the concrete instance and the principles by which the mind makes sense of it. He simply asserts the need for the principle to be reformulated, as we see in “Esthétique”: “...out of what one sees and hears...”

When Stevens speaks of meditation, he refers to a personalized practice of using images to think through various abstract propositions, weighing competing assertions against each other at each step. These concrete images come from observation. As we have seen, he asserts that this connection supplants any link between *reading* and meditation. In a letter dated June 20, 1945, Stevens offers Rodríguez Feo a remarkably candid picture of his own poetic methods, beginning with the assertion that he “...no longer read[s] because it doesn’t seem worth while...” (62). Having negated again a textual basis for poetic inspiration, Stevens continues: “Reality is the great *fond*, and it is because it is that the purely literary amounts to so little. Moreover, in the world of

actuality, in spite of all I have just said, one is always living a little out of it” (62). The rejection of “the purely literary” is clear, as is an assertion of the importance of an empirical method that proceeds from “[r]eality” and “actuality.”

Yet Stevens’s argument in this passage is somewhat less polished than at other moments, as evidenced in his diction (“...and it is because it is that. ..”). The looseness of his style shows him rushing through this clear statement of an empirical basis for poetry towards an attenuation of that argument in the next sentence, which is somewhat illogically introduced with the word “Moreover.” Stevens asserts that the poet who immerses herself in observation of the actual world always has one foot outside that world. It becomes clear from the statement that follows that this fact arises from the primacy, not of empiricism, but of poetic creation. The poet is not a passively receptive and unbiased recorder of images and sensations; her immersion in the world of the actual is always motivated by the primary impulse toward the composition of new poetic images, a practice aligned with the discipline of meditation.

Stevens makes this connection via a passage from Henry James’s notebooks: “To live *in* the world of creation—to get into it and stay in it—to frequent it and haunt it—to *think* intensely and fruitfully—to woo combinations and inspirations into being by a depth and continuity of attention and meditation—this is the only thing” (62).<sup>6</sup> The citation describes an artistic discipline Stevens identifies with, and it is useful to read the passage through the interpretive lens of Stevens’s poetics. James describes creation as a discipline, and so does Stevens in his own comments to Rodríguez Feo. Furthermore, the passage centers on a central intellectual operation: the coordination of “attention” and “meditation.” Seen from the perspective of Stevens’s empiricism, the first term suggests

attention to the details of the sensory image as well as of the mental image. Attention to the mental image (which should have a firm empirical foundation) is the basis for meditation, a method of thinking that is sustained by the “continuity” of engagement with images, and which is imperiled chiefly by the potential for distraction. The methodology of attention and meditation must unfold gradually, systematically, and without interruption. In the context of comments by Stevens that we have seen so far, reading would represent just this kind of interruption.

In a letter dated July 1945, Rodríguez Feo responds to Stevens’s serious and extended statement of his own poetics with a surprising levity: “Your citation from James is delightfully personal” (63). Though the Cuban acknowledges how the passage from James has allowed Stevens to open up to him and express closely held beliefs, the adverb “delightfully” deflates the American poet’s seriousness. By refraining from commenting further on Stevens’s statements, Rodríguez Feo neither subscribes to, nor dismisses them.

Instead, he chooses, at a moment in which Stevens’s arguments have gathered a certain continuity and momentum over the course of several letters, to open a space for the assertion of his own literary, aesthetic, philosophical and political values. This moment in the correspondence should lead the reader to revise any preconceptions of a rhetorical advantage sustained by Stevens over his younger Cuban counterpart.

Rodríguez Feo exerts the power of the limited response to an enthusiastic statement from his correspondent, in order to maintain the coherence of his own constellation of ideas.

Rodríguez Feo deflects Stevens’s comments about observation and meditation by asserting his scholarly predilections. He continues his relentless citations of authors he is studying—including George Leite, Henri Michaux, Léon Bloy, George Santayana, and

Djuna Barnes—asserting himself again as scholarly reader, in contrast to Stevens’s role as meditative poet. The Cuban does not allow his correspondence with Stevens to become a kind of literary interview, in which the older poet espouses his personal aesthetics and the younger scholar responds with questions to stimulate elaborations or clarifications. Instead, he maintains his agenda of sustaining a conversation between readers, in spite of Stevens’s inveterate lack of enthusiasm for scholarly pursuits.

In the same letter, Rodríguez Feo challenges Stevens’s assertions further by expressing an identification with “Platonism” and by suggesting that even Stevens himself must be a Platonist. This second assertion is a more aggressive refutation of the American poet’s assertions, registering a personal challenge rather than a simple assertion of opinion. Rodríguez Feo’s introduction of the concept of Platonism follows a lament on the stagnation of Cuba’s intellectual culture: “The terrible gap with us is intelligence! And really there cannot be passion without intelligence, or courage or real hatred—Platonic, yes, but then all goes back to good old Plato who I realize must be your favorite boy too!” (64-5). Inasmuch as the “intelligence” he speaks of is “Platonic,” it suggests a knowledge, through contemplation, of eternal forms (*noumena*) that is contrasted with uncultivated emotion (“passion,” “courage,” “hatred”). This knowledge has little to do with observation of the phenomenal world, which, according to Plato’s allegory of the Cave in the *Republic*, consists of flickering shadows of the unchanging Forms.

In the most immediate sense, Rodríguez Feo counterposes this Platonic intelligence to Stevens’s notion of meditation based on observation. Where Stevens’s concept of meditation is a methodology of thinking through concrete images, his Cuban counterpart suggests a process of intellection that rejects the epistemological value of any

particular instantiation of the Form in favor of a process whereby the Form is intuited in a mental movement beyond the plane of sensory images.

Stevens responds in part to his correspondent's epistemological differences, though he realizes that Rodríguez Feo's comments do not completely oppose his own, as they describe a societal problem (a general intellectual listlessness) rather than a specifically poetic one. Stevens recognizes that his correspondent's comments challenge his poetics somewhat indirectly, a phenomenon we will see repeated throughout their dialogue. In this case, the comments represent Rodríguez Feo's effort to pose a relation between his own intellectual work within the context of the *Orígenes* project and a local cultural context. He describes Cubans as a people whose thinking is so limited to the local that they soon feel that they know everything there is to know. He poses Platonism as a remedy for this provincialism.<sup>7</sup> Stevens's assertion of the importance of observation translates in Rodríguez Feo's thinking into the importance of limiting oneself to the *Cuban* realities that surround him, a practice he believes Cubans and Cuban literary culture have perfected to a fault. *Orígenes* resists crude artistic localisms; it seeks a delicate balance between the assertion of a national identity and the idea that such an identity must flow in universal intellectual currents.

In a letter to Henry Church, dated July 19, 1945, Stevens opposes Rodríguez Feo's comments on Cuban culture:

My young man in Havana continues to send me letters of great interest... My particular José dislikes the taste of Cuba; yet it is Cuba that has been his own matrix. His view is that of the Platonic young intellectual. He says... "Is it because everybody *knows* and is bored to death before actually dying of

everything?” This is merely his Platonism. He lives like the perpetual reader, without sex or politics. I speak of him because he is typical. (508)

Stevens deflates Rodríguez Feo’s Platonism as “merely” something typical of his age (he was 24 at the time). He suggests that the normal tendency early in life is toward a form of idealism that retreats from a surrounding reality that seems to offer little in the way of novelty. Stevens implies that this retreat causes one to live “like the perpetual reader,” an existence that the American poet has categorically rejected, as we have seen.

Stevens clearly laments the tendency of his young Cuban correspondent to retreat from local reality because he feels that the local forms one’s intellectual “matrix.” According to this metaphor, the local is a nurturing force surrounding an individual’s ideas; it is in a literal sense the womb in which ideas gestate (the word “matrix” derives from Latin *mater*, or “mother”). This metaphor forcefully asserts the primacy of empirical reality, in strong resistance to a Platonic ontology. This reality surrounds and feeds the idea like a womb, and thus both pre-exists and contains the abstract concept. Platonism asserts exactly the reverse; knowledge of the numinous is posited as a memory or nostalgia for the pre-existing Form, whose multiple instantiations are contained by it.

#### **“Four Poems”: Realism versus Romanticism**

Stevens’s response to Rodríguez Feo’s Platonic assertions takes the form of four poems, which the latter receives in August, 1945. The poems are published in *Orígenes* in a translation by Óscar Rodríguez Feliú. As we will see, these poems continue the two men’s textual conversation in way that recasts Stevens’s arguments, while introducing,



through the suggestiveness of their imagery, further and more nuanced developments of those arguments. We will first need to read the original poems in the context of the correspondence. Then, we see how the translations process the originals in identifiable ways for incorporation into the context of *Orígenes*, even though the translator is not the one engaged in the fruitful exchanges with the author that we have seen so far.

“The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm” depicts a reader intensely involved and invested in his book, a figure that clearly represents Rodríguez Feo to some extent. Like the young scholar in the café in “Esthétique,” this reader is so wholly absorbed by the contemplation of abstract concepts through reading that the actuality of the world around him loses relevance. Just as the concept of the sublime processes the threatening physical presence of Vesuvius into something manageable, the reader’s surroundings in “The House” are transformed by his contemplation: “...summer night/ Was like the conscious being of the book” (2-3). The night becomes “...like a perfection of thought” (9); it loses its experiential specificity and becomes a Platonic Idea.

The reader leaves the world of experience behind in the hope that the textual world he enters will present him with absolute Truth: “...the reader leaned above the page,/ Wanted to lean, wanted much most to be/ The scholar to whom his book is true...” (8). For this scholar, Truth is to be gained from a text, rather than from sense experience. Significantly, the speaker does not portray this epistemological stance as rational. Instead, he insists, through the repetition of the verb “wanted,” that desire drives the reader’s thinking. Rather than arrive rationally at the assertion that Truth is to be found in a book, the reader believes the assertion because he wants to. This problem of the primacy of desire over thought recurs throughout the four poems as a particularly

important example of a subjectivity that isolates itself from empirical reality. Stevens's speakers repeatedly lament the failure of the human mind to more directly receive information from the outside world and avoid the pitfalls of the will's distortions of perception.

Further, this desire does more than circumvent rational considerations; it drives a fundamental confusion of the subjective with the objective, a problem we have seen treated in "A Word with José Rodríguez Feo." The speaker is so intensely involved in his study that not only is the observable reshaped by concepts; more profoundly, the reader himself becomes indistinguishable from the Idea he contemplates. In an astonishing twist of argument, executed through the continued repetition of the poem's central terms ("calm," "summer," "night"), the reader's subjectivity is itself subsumed by the Idea:

And the world was calm. The truth in a calm world,

In which there is no other meaning, itself

Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself

Is the reader leaning late and reading there. (13-16)

The reader ceases to be independent from what he contemplates; the truth becomes him and he becomes the truth. The scholar invests his subjectivity so totally in what he studies that his own person is no longer distinguishable from it. The philosophical difficulty that this assertion raises is the breakdown of the distinction between subject and object.

The result is a restatement of the problem of solipsism in surprisingly blunt terms; the reader, fused with what he contemplates, is unable to think about anything but himself. This rhetorical move at the end of the poem encloses the reader in his own subjectivity in an exaggerated fashion. The statement of the philosophical problem works through a rhetorical method of repetition that builds to a dramatization of the problem of solipsism; the assertion that results is categorical and inflexible. These characteristics contrast with “Thinking of the Relation Between the Images of Metaphors” and “Continual Conversation With a Silent Man,” whose rhetoric betrays greater degrees of ambivalence.

“Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion,” like “The World,” presents a categorical challenge to solipsism. In the poem, the reader is replaced with the German painter Ludwig Richter (1803-84). Richter’s romantic landscapes project human emotions onto natural phenomena. Alongside the figure of the reader in the café, they dramatize the problem of solipsism and function as another negative example in relation to the epistemology Stevens develops in his letters. Stevens’s use of the figure of Richter is somewhat oblique, as he comes to be associated with an operatic spectacle. Perhaps the opera’s set design is done in a picturesque style like Richter’s. The artist is closely associated with the spectacle’s absurdity, as if he were its creator.

By taking up Richter as an object lesson, Stevens’s speaker evokes and confronts German Romanticism as a whole. The speaker’s depiction of Richter’s work epitomizes a typically hostile vision of the German Romantic movement, or to its counterparts in England and France. For Stevens’s speaker, Richter embodies what M. H. Abrams describes as the tendencies of the German “romantic extremists,” who “...made the work

of art out to be, in a fashion even more absolute than the world of perception, an expression of unadulterated spirit” (90). As the creator who is indistinguishable from what he creates, Richter epitomizes this dynamic of exteriorization, this constant and unmediated “expression” (in its literal sense of pushing outward) of the interior spirit. In this schematized vision of Romanticism, observation of the natural world never possesses independent value. When nature appears, it always serves as the expression of an interior state.

Richter’s interior world functions an emblem of solipsism, as does the reader’s mentality in “The House.” Nonetheless, the turbulence of Richter’s world contrasts sharply with the tranquility of the scholar bent over his book:

Oh, that this lashing wind was something more

Than the spirit of Ludwig Richter...

The rain is pouring down. It is July.

There is lightning and the thickest thunder.

It is a spectacle. Scene 10 becomes 11,

In Series X, Act IV, et cetera. (1-6)

Though the spectacle is full of drama, the viewer/speaker’s boredom is comically evident in the exhausted tone of the third strophe. The drama fails to hold his attention because it consists of nothing more than the exposition of its creator’s inner states; everything available to the sense experience of the viewer is “nothing more/ [t]han the spirit” of an

artist made manifest in a work. The images do not remind the viewer of anything in reality.

Like the figure of the reader in the previous poem, Richter escapes the world of actuality through fiction. Further, both figures *are* the fiction into which they retreat; Richter is only different in that the fiction is of his own making. They both surrender any claim to a position of difference and distance from an object of contemplation. Subject and object relationships break down as Richter:

Knows desire without an object of desire,  
All mind and violence and nothing felt.

He knows he has nothing more to think about,

Like the wind that lashes everything at once. (15-18)

Again, as in “The House,” desire is responsible for the disintegration of a rational relationship to objective reality. The speaker does not assert that desire is to be discarded completely, though. Instead, he warns that the solipsist cannot exercise desire correctly, because no object exists outside the sphere of his all-encompassing subjectivity. In a crucial distinction, the speaker asserts that desire is possible only when there is an objective world beyond the individual from which he can receive an emotional or aesthetic stimulus. Ludwig Richter’s self-generating passion, in contrast, no longer responds to the outside world.

In “Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors,” Stevens offers a positive example in relation to the poetics and epistemology he espouses, one that contrasts sharply with the figures of the scholar and the Romantic artist. Following the

pattern of the previous two poems, there is a single figure who serves as a distillation of a constellation of traits, in this case positive. Here, this figure is a fisherman on the banks of the Perkiomen, a stream that runs near the house in Reading, Pennsylvania, where Stevens himself grew up. The autobiographical nature of the poem's setting suggests a proximity between the speaker's assertions and the poet's. The poem opens with images that prepare for the poem's description of the possibility of an empirical revelation.

First, the opening images establish a contrast that helps the moment of revelation stand in relief. The imagery of the bass "shrinking from the spit and splash/ Of waterish spears" (6-7) evokes a violence and frenzied movement that will come to contrast the placidity of the fisherman's moment of revelation. The dove, an emblem of peace, evokes a more profound sense of awed calm and silence in contrast to this opening image.

Second, a suggestion of atemporality provides sympathetic conceptual support (rather than an imagistic contrast, as seen in the previous example). A synchronicity is established in the scene by the assertion that the fish's behavior is still affected by the threat of Native American fisherman long vanished from the poem's geographical location: "The bass lie deep, still afraid of the Indians" (1-2). In two basic ways, this temporal phenomenon is intimately connected to the empirical discipline that the poem describes and espouses. First, it springs from the speaker's observation of the fish's behavior, though it also involves an imaginative leap to include the Indians in the scene. Second, and more importantly, the suggestion of a synchronicity supports the possibility of a revelation that lifts the observer out of the "stream" of time and allows him to

apprehend the singularity of the concrete reality rather than the concrete reality undergoing constant and multiple transformations through time.

The fisherman of the poem, in contrast to the Platonism, solipsism, and romanticism of figures in previous poems, represents an empirical ideal. The fisherman is rhetorically reduced to the sense organs through which he receives visual and auditory images of the bass swimming in the stream and the doves singing above. He becomes “[o]ne ear” (4) and “[o]ne eye” (8). Rather than work toward the exteriorization of a subjective state as would the romantic artist, the fisherman strives to receive reality in an unmediated fashion: “The fisherman is all/ One eye, in which the dove resembles the dove” (7-8). This rhetorical formulation of the fisherman’s realism suggests the outcome that has arisen from the intellectual activity described in the poem’s title. The empirical revelation collapses the mechanism of resemblance built into metaphor. As a result, metaphor becomes a mediated and unnecessary approximation of pure perception.

Nonetheless, Stevens’s speaker follows this deconstruction of metaphor with a musical metaphor for the fisherman’s approximation to the Real. The doves’ song becomes a series of musical variations on an “unstated theme” (11). Though the metaphor leads to the description of a state of pure empirical receptivity, by its very metaphorical nature, it already relativizes that description. As we will see below, other rhetorical features reveal that the speaker only proposes the potential for this epistemological state.

The musical “theme” suggests a structuring reality behind the multiple aesthetic experiences the poem describes, and the fisherman’s attentive observation draws him close to its “disclosure” (13):

...How close

To the unstated theme each variation comes ...

In that one ear it might strike perfectly:

State the disclosure. In that one eye the dove

Might spring to sight and yet remain a dove.

The fisherman might be the single man

In whose breast, the dove, alighting, would grow still. (10-16)

The image of “disclosure” suggests an unmediated revelation. The image of the fisherman’s “breast” represents the site of an internalization of the objective reality, and the stillness that occurs after the dove “alights” there contrasts with the violent movements of subjectivity described in “Chaos.” The objective reality, when it is apprehended perfectly, takes on the stillness of constancy.

Yet the metaphorical nature of these images undercuts their very potential as a means for espousing a realist epistemology. Even further, we observe at the end of the poem the mediating presence of desire in the auxiliary verbs “might” and “would,” betraying a similarity with the reader in “The House.” The poem testifies to the *desire* of both fisherman and poetic speaker for a moment of clarity and reception, rather than narrating that moment’s occurrence. In the end, what Stevens suggests through the voice of this speaker is a *methodology* that promises an approximation to realism, rather than a dogmatic statement of realism as a program.<sup>8</sup>



Finally, “Continual Conversation with a Silent Man” is the most enigmatic of the four poems, a text whose analysis helps us understand the complexity of the messages encoded in the grouping of the four poems as a whole. At the poem’s opening, the speaker situates a human collectivity between the poles of experiential reality and intersubjective abstraction. These two elements are represented, respectively, by the image of a hen and of the sky. The two images evoke the homely practicality of farm life, and more generally, the world of everyday experience.

The hen and the cartwheel stand opposite the sky and the leaves, which are upturned by “...the never-ending storm of will,/ One will and many wills, and the wind,/ Of many meanings in the leaves...” (7-9). If the previous pair of images suggests a pragmatic, physical existence, the storm is a metaphor for subjectivity and abstraction (as it is in “Chaos”). This world is chaotic in its multiplicity (“many wills,” “many meanings”), in contrast to the singularity of the images of the hen and the cartwheel. The idea of multiple wills suggests the storm to be a site of intersubjectivity. At this site, we find the thoughts and desires of many people in a state of volatile interaction. There is an implicit connection between the intersubjectivity of the poem and the intertextuality that Stevens rejects as a proper basis for poetic thought and practice. The “storm of will” can be read as an image for the multiple sites of conflictive interaction among texts, as textuality serves as a medium for the staging of those interactions.

The speaker aligns everyday experience in its most concrete, unmediated form, with individuality. The world of concepts, on the other hand, is inhabited by a collectivity full of conflicting desires and ideas. In this contrast we find the now familiar opposition between concrete experience and abstract thinking.

The central image of the poem is the connection between the farm and the storm, the “[l]ink, of that tempest, to the farm,/ The chain of the turquoise hen and sky/ And the wheel that broke as the cart went by” (11-13). The speaker evokes the image of the link to call forth the mysterious connection between the collective subjectivity and the individual subjectivity “under the eaves.” The “turquoise hen” appears at the site of this connection, her color changed from a natural brown to an unreal blue. She thus embodies the fusion of the earthly and the otherworldly, doubling and emphasizing the “link” between those two realms. The blue of the sky, which is the site of the storm of intersubjective abstraction, is “brought down” to the animal that inhabits the farm, the site of concrete considerations and of the domestic existence of the individual. What this imagistic relationship evokes is the question of how practical decisions are informed by pervasive, dispersed, and collective ways of thinking. The poem’s final two stanzas attempt a characterization of this phenomenon from the point of view of the individual inhabiting his concrete domestic space.

The speaker attempts this characterization through the image of the sound of the tempest “brought down” to the domestic space. The sound thereby aligns itself with the turquoise hen and the “link.” Negating that the sound is a “voice” (14) or “speech” (15), the speaker asserts that collective abstraction does not speak to us in a coherent, intelligible way. Instead, the sound is indeterminate, anonymous, and vaguely threatening:

It is not speech, the sound we hear  
In this conversation, but the sound  
Of things and their motion: the other man,

A turquoise monster moving round. (15-18)

The sound is connected to three sources: “things,” a “man,” and a “monster,” leaving the reader without a clear sense of its meaning. The characteristics of each disparate element add to the image of the intersubjective sphere, resulting in a complex and evocative description. “The other man” condenses the many subjectivities of the tempest into a singular, personal Other. This figure is the “silent man” of the poem’s title. The individual is aware of being in dialogue with this intersubjective Other, though this figure paradoxically communicates nothing to him.

A comma marks the transition to a new embodiment of the intersubjective sphere, the “turquoise monster,” which adds its features to the complex characterization of that sphere. The monster’s movement parallels the unsettled nature of the storm, suggesting the difficulty of finding any kind of certainty in an essentially chaotic sphere. It is implied that the turquoise monster is a restatement of the identity of “the sound of things and their motion” and “the other man.” The danger that the monster evokes repeats the threat of the “tempest.” Through the connections we have established thus far, it is clear that this danger emerges in part from the presence of the Other in the sphere of intersubjectivity, a presence with the potential to subsume the subjectivity of the individual. Etymologically, the word “monster” is based in the Latin *monere* (to warn), as are *monstrare* (to show), and *monstrum* (that which instructs). The monster is the form that the threatening Other takes to warn the individual that he is standing on the precipice between intellectual self-sufficiency and its dissolution.

As a whole, the poem implicitly valorizes individual concrete experience that is undisturbed by the storm of intersubjective abstraction. It thus stands as a continuation of

Stevens's arguments for a realist aesthetics based on concrete observations and independent meditations upon those observations. The form that the restatement of this theme takes in this poem is particularly dogmatic, as we have seen, marked as it is by an almost paranoid suspicion of dialogue, intertextuality, and the possibility of the destruction of individuality.

### **“Cuatro Poemas”: The Refraction of Stevens's Poetics through Translation**

As a group, the four poems Stevens sends to Rodríguez Feo in the summer of 1945 continue a line of argument begun in the two men's correspondence. As we have seen, their imagery calls forth the central issues of subjectivity and objectivity that are so central to that line of argument. The poems allow Stevens to go beyond what can be conveyed in prose, employing poetic means to deepen and extend the scope of his dialogue with Rodríguez Feo. The concreteness of his poetic images (reader, artist, fisherman, monster) allow Stevens to play out scenarios in which each side of the argument develops itself imagistically, with each implication taking on a visible form. Stevens's deployment of poetic discourse to expand the expressive depth of the correspondence is evidence of the developing intellectual engagement between Rodríguez Feo and him.

Understanding the significance of Stevens's poetic gestures makes it register as a great surprise that Rodríguez Feo's response is so laconic. It is clear from the Cuban's acknowledgment of the poems that he does not immediately engage in a thorough reading of its images, which, as we have seen, require some interpretive processing before their place in the overarching discourse of the correspondence becomes clear. Instead,

Rodríguez Feo offers a bland commendation of the poet's style: "Your poems arrived successfully, full of that lucidity and nobility which your last style revealed" (67). No significant response to the content or methods of the poems comes later in the correspondence either, representing a significant lacuna in the discussion of the philosophical bases of Stevens and Rodríguez Feo's respective poetics.

Further, the Cuban editor's refusal to translate the poems, despite his early attempts to render "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" and "Esthétique du Mal" into Spanish, represents a deliberate break in the dialogue in another way. Rodríguez Feo explains to Stevens: "I have given [the poems] to a Cuban poet whom I trust more than myself since his poetic insight will suffice and probably render the poems with more exactitude than my insufficient manipulation of the language" (67). Rodríguez Feo does not address an essential problem here: he himself is in the position to carry out a particularly informed interpretation of the poems, based on his studies, previous translations, and his ongoing correspondence with the poet.

Furthermore, by translating the poems himself, Rodríguez Feo could have offered a response to Stevens's assertions in two senses. First, the process of interpretation that precedes any good translation would be visible in the Spanish text, thereby registering Rodríguez Feo's understanding of what the American poet hoped to convey. Second, the act of processing the text such that it fits its new poetic context could embody a contrapuntal response to the poems' original assertions, even though the American poet would have been poorly qualified to identify those linguistic operations in Spanish. These acts would not have been entirely intelligible to Stevens, but they would nonetheless become part of the contrapuntal textual formation examined in this study.

It is difficult to speculate why Rodríguez Feo does not take up this challenge. It will be useful nonetheless to examine each of Rodríguez Feliú's translations, as they create the actual appearance of Stevens's work in *Orígenes* and form an important part of the aforementioned textual edifice. Furthermore, though he does so from an outside position, Rodríguez Feliú continues the conversation between Rodríguez Feo and Stevens. We will approach them in the same order in which we have treated the original texts.

"The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" appears as "La Casa y el Mundo en Calma..." ("The Calm House and World..."). The shortening of the title in the translation renders a more concise title than the verbose original, though the most striking feature is the ellipsis that follows. This punctuation announces a fundamental operation of the translation as a whole: an undermining of the poem's completeness as a statement against readerly solipsism, and a subsequent attenuation of the text's argumentative force. The ellipsis signals the introduction of a more provisional tone and an incomplete realization of argument in the translation.

The first moment that illustrates this process occurs at line 2, where the phrase "The reader became the book" is rendered as "El lector se hacía libro" (2). Whereas the original categorically states the confusion of the reader's subjectivity with what he is reading, the use of the imperfect aspect in the translation ("se hacía") denotes an action in process. This effect weakens the phrase's logical connection to the fusions that follow, where the night and the calm atmosphere become part of the book's meaning *as a result of* the process whereby the reader wholly submerges himself in the book.

Another moment of attenuation follows. At line 10 of the original, the speaker restates the implications of the reader's total engagement with the abstract world of his book—that the objective world is reshaped according to the requirements of the reader's mental state rather than the latter responding to the former: "The house was quiet because it had to be" (10). The translation of this line reads: "La casa estaba en calma, justamente" ("The house was calm, justly [or rightly]") (10). Whereas the original marks the force exerted upon concrete reality with the phrase "had to be," the translated text lacks the same emphasis. The term "justamente" signifies that the calm was appropriate or right in a somewhat abstract sense; the original insists on the distorting force exerted on the empirical reality by a mental state. Again, the original clearly makes a more pointed case against the state of affairs it describes.

At another significant moment, the "scholar" who so invests himself in his reading becomes "el estudiante" ("the student"), altering our sense of the scholar's activity. Because the term "scholar" connotes a higher degree of intellectual experience and disciplinary professionalism, his action of submerging himself in the book's world is more deliberate and conscious. These qualities make the scholar's action a more substantial object for the speaker's ironic treatment. When the scholar becomes a "student," the translation suggests a naiveté behind the desire for the book to be true. The student's mental states serve as a weaker representative of a coherent intellectual program. As a result, the speaker's irony registers with less force.

Finally, a breakdown in conveying the sense of the poem's last four lines completes the translation's process of obfuscating the original's argumentative clarity. First, the original:

...The truth in a calm world,

In which there is no other meaning, itself

Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself

Is the reader leaning late and reading there. (13-16)

As we have already stated, these lines systematically erase any distinction between subjective and objective realities. In contrast, the translation renders a sentence fragment that fails to communicate this basic concept effectively:

...La verdad en la calma,

en un mundo donde no hay otro sentido,

porque el mismo es la calma, el verano y la noche,

y el nocturno lector que allí se inclina y lee. (13-16)

(...The truth in the calm,

in a world where there is no other meaning,

because it itself is the calm, the summer and the night,

and the nocturnal reader who leans and reads there.) (13-16)

The identification among the truth, the calm, the “summer and night,” and the reader breaks down in the translation. The verb “Is,” which states the ontological connection between the subjective and the objective, disappears, and is replaced by an illogical “because” (“porque”). The resulting lines are very difficult to parse. The translation’s



ending culminates a process whereby the speaker's oppositional stance to the reader's intellectual orientation is undermined. The translation, as a result, reads like a description that suggests the confusion of the mental state with the empirical reality, with little of the polemical thrust of the original.

The translation as a whole represents an indirect, yet significant intervention into the overarching textual dialogue between Rodríguez Feo and Stevens. As we have established, the reader of "The World" likely represents an aspect of Rodríguez Feo's personality, as seen from Stevens's point of view. The operations that the translation carries out upon the original recast the image of Rodríguez Feo in the poem, thereby altering the tenor of the two men's textual dialogue from a third position occupied by the translator, a man not involved in the conversation. The fact that Rodríguez Feo appears as a student in the translation, and that his mental states express an intellectual program that is neither as extreme nor as serious as those of the scholar in the original, marks a deflection of Stevens's poetic critique of his correspondent. "La casa y el mundo en calma..." speaks for Rodríguez Feo, saying: I am but a student, with no pretensions to be a scholar; my intellectual positions are less solid and thus less effective as a distillation of the ideas you oppose. In this manner, Rodríguez Feliú's translation repeats the evasive and resistive act inherent in Rodríguez Feo's decision to pass the translation task along to him. To the extent that the figure of the student represents more possibility for intellectual change and flexibility than can be attributed to the scholar, it does perhaps represent Rodríguez Feo's claim for a more nuanced and dynamic intellectual system, in resistance to the schematization that the symbolic figure of the reader enforces on him in Stevens's poem.

“El caos móvil e inmóvil” (“Mobile and Immobile Chaos”), the translation of “Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion,” enacts a similar process of attenuation, though a profound alteration of sense at the very opening of the translation appears to be something more extreme—an act of pure sabotage. In the first stanza of the original, the speaker laments that the spectacle he is viewing is nothing more than the expression of the interiority of the German Romantic artist. Though the subjunctive verb “were” is not used, the subjunctive mood is still evoked in a colloquial sense with the verb “was”: “Oh, that this lashing wind was something more/ than the spirit of Ludwig Richter...” (1-2). In the translation, there is no hint of the subjunctive, and the idea that is subsequently expressed is the exact opposite of the original: “Este aire que todo lo castiga/ es todavía algo más que el espíritu de Ludwig Richter...” (1-2) (“This air that punishes everything/ is still something more than the spirit of Ludwig Richter...”). These opening lines seem to dismantle the foundation of the speaker’s critique. The natural imagery of the spectacle appears as something beyond the creative mind of Richter himself, perhaps an objective reality exterior to him.

Despite this profound alteration, the rest of the translation proceeds to offer a fairly faithful version of the original. The poem’s imagery is rather accurately reconstructed and even the original’s final indictment of the creator’s indiscriminate mind, though it contradicts the translation’s opening statement, is preserved with only minor alterations.

Looking at the whole translation, the reader can see that what seems like a complete collapse at the beginning is simply an inflection of the original text’s argument. As the speaker asserts that the wind of the spectacle *is indeed* something more than the

spirit of its creator, it simply presents a more direct statement of what is implied in the irony of the original—that there *is* an extra-subjective reality that should be the source for art. Yet, like the assertion of an “absolute grotesque” in “A Word with José Rodríguez Feo,” this feature of the translation betrays the philosophical basis from which the ironic treatment of Richter works, and thereby opens the text to more questioning than does the original. The opening affirmation found in the translation can lead to challenging responses, such as: what exactly is the reality of the natural phenomenon evoked in the spectacle? The original, in keeping the affirmation of an objective reality unstated, is more effective as a deconstruction of Richter’s solipsism.

“Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors,” translated as “Unidad de las imágenes” (“Unity of Images”), contains an even greater number of breakdowns in the transfer of literal meanings than does “Caos.” As we will see, the translation goes so far as to introduce a wholly new thematic. Despite this fact, “Unidad” carries out some interpretive modulations from the literal that bolster the assertions of the original.

The natural imagery of the original is altered so strangely in the translation that the reader suspects poor eyesight on the part of the translator or typographical errors in the text from which he is working. The opening lines of the original read: “The wood-doves are singing along the Perkiomen./ The bass lie deep, still afraid of the Indians” (1-2). The translation reads: “Las palomas del bosque cantan sobre el Perkiomen./ Abajo el profundo esparto, temeroso todavía de los indios” (1-2) (“The wood doves sing above the Perkiomen./ Below, the deep esparto grass, still afraid of the Indians” (1-2). The “bass” of lines 2, 5 and 9, become “grass” (“esparto”). In the original, the bass avoid imaginary

Indians whose spears pierce the water's surface: "The bass keep looking ahead, upstream, in one/ Direction, shrinking from the spit and splash/ Of waterish spears..." (5-7). The translator finds himself lost at this moment, unable to make literal sense of the original. The translation reads: "En una sola dirección, corriente arriba,/ vigila el esparto erguido—lanzas de agua le estremecen" (5-6) ("In only one direction, upstream,/ the upright esparto grass keeps watch—spears of water shake it.")

The basic confusion between fauna and flora nonetheless does not interfere with the original's most basic aesthetic and thematic structures. The contrast between movement and stillness, as well as the suggestion of a synchronicity (though it makes less literal sense with grass substituted for bass) are still present in the translation. Further, the image of the fisherman and his empirical activity are quite clearly expressed in the translation.

Beyond this level of basic conceptual fidelity, we observe literal deviations that provide illuminating interpretations of the original. For example, the depiction of the doves' song in the original is altered in the translation to emphasize the contrast between the singularity of the underlying theme and the variations that the song produces. In the original, the speaker asserts: "There is one dove, one bass, one fisherman./ Yet coo becomes rou-coo, rou-coo. How close/ To the unstated theme each variation comes..." (9-11). The speaker of the translation explicitly states the transition from the singularity evoked in line 9 to the contrasting multiplicity of the variations on a theme in the doves' song: "Solo [sic] hay un pescador, un esparto, una paloma,/ pero el canto se hace doble. Cómo se acerca/ cada variación al tema no fijado..." (9-11) ("There is only one fisherman, one esparto grass, one dove,/ but the song doubles. How each theme

approaches/ the unstated theme”). The image of the dove’s song is not only preserved, but processed according to a perceptive reading of the poem on the part of the translator. The translation replaces the onomatopoeic evocation of the doves’ song in the original with the assertion that the song doubles itself, underlining the contrast between the ideal singularity that the empirical project of the fisherman works to apprehend and the real multiplicity in the empirical world that suggests that singularity without achieving it. The translation even adds the adverb “Solo [sic]” (“Only”) (9) to further emphasize the singularity that the doves’ song can only approximate.

In the poem’s seventh strophe, a fundamental divergence from the original transforms the statement of the possibility of an empirical discovery into its affirmation. Up to this point we have discussed a revelation that exists as a possibility or a promise that is implied in the fisherman’s ideology, yet “the disclosure” occurs only in the conditional. In the translation, a revelation is announced in the indicative mood: “La revelación se afirma” (13) (“The revelation states [asserts] itself”). The translation thereby adopts a wholly different methodology—one of illustration rather than speculation. The fisherman’s receptivity to the reality that surrounds him is rewarded with a revelation.

Beyond this fundamental shift of perspective and of argument, the fact that the “disclosure” of the original becomes “revelation” in the translation is significant. “La revelación” is a term that introduces religious connotations into the descriptions of the fisherman’s empirical methodology, suggesting a divine agency behind the epistemological event. “Disclosure” is more neutral and technical, denoting the opening of something previously closed. At one stroke, the natural imagery that builds to this

moment is retroactively transformed into a sacred setting, a scene where perception of the exterior reality is not an end in itself but rather preparation for a different kind of vision.

Whereas the original figures the “disclosure” as an event of pure perception, the “revelation” in the translation does not occur in the same way. The revelation “states itself.” It implicitly occurs through language, suggesting that it is a revelation of a divine Word, especially when seen in the context of the connotative charge of the term “revelation” itself.

Following the “statement” of the revelation, the poem’s most peculiar modulation occurs. The speaker of the original imagines the “disclosure” of reality as an act of pure visual perception, as the dove “Might spring to sight and yet remain a dove” (14). In the translation, the same line reads “podría volverse mirada y ser aún paloma” (14) (“could become a gaze and still be a dove”). Rather than simply make itself visible, the dove becomes a gaze; in the process, it makes a radical transition from being a pure object to being both an object and a subject, invested with the capacity to gaze back at the viewer. In the most immediate sense, this significant alteration in the translation continues the work done by the word “revelación”—it alters the purely empirical nature of the fisherman’s project in the original. A disruption also arises from the image of the gaze in its suggestion of a challenge to the fisherman’s dominance over what he perceives. When the object of a gaze itself becomes a gaze, it stares back, undermining the subject’s status as pure subject by objectifying him.<sup>9</sup>

In relation to the sacred connotations that the translation introduces, we can also see the gaze as a divinity that is transposed onto the object. The use of the term “revelation” plays a part in establishing the context for this reading of the gaze, as does

the fact that the object of observation in both the original and the translation is a dove, an image with Christian resonances. The dove represents the Holy Spirit; the fisherman becomes like John the Baptist, who, at the moment he baptizes Jesus in the River Jordan, witnesses the descent of the Holy Spirit as a dove and hears God announce that Jesus is His Son (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32). Within the Biblical context that these associations point to, the fisherman also evokes the episode in which Jesus calls upon the fishermen Simon and Andrew to become disciples, or “fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19).<sup>10</sup>

The revelation that “states itself” can be read as a reference to the words of revelation that John the Baptist hears: “This is my beloved Son. My favor rests on him” (Matt. 3:16). The gaze into which the dove transforms itself would thus be an imaginative transposition of the gaze of a personal God onto the image that traditionally represents the non-human Holy Spirit. The subjectivity that is ascribed to what was previously an object becomes the subjectivity of God. The fact that the dove remains itself in spite of this transposition no longer means that it remains a pure objective reality, but instead, that the imaginative transposition allows the dove to remain a symbol of the Holy Spirit, its more traditional function.

The alighting of the dove in the breast of the fisherman, which is clearly conveyed in the translation, also constitutes an imaginative interjection. When John baptizes Jesus, the sky opens, and the dove descends from heaven, hovering above Jesus’s body. The translation extends this image, such that the dove of the Holy Spirit comes to rest in John himself (in the form of the fisherman/disciple); the revelation is thus, as in the original poem, portrayed as something that is profoundly internalized by the witness. But further,

it suggests a Christian mystic sense of union with God, typically imagined as a corporal convergence (it is not the soul or the mind where the dove comes to rest but rather in “el pecho” (“the breast”). In our initial Lacanian reading, we asserted the threatening nature of an object-become-gaze. This fact is compatible with the spiritual allegory the translation constructs, as the divine gaze would indeed play the role of undermining the empiricist’s hubristic confidence that the fullness of reality is available through the apparatus of sense perception.

If the argument for an empiricist aesthetics is radically transformed in “Unidad” and “Conversación con un hombre silencioso,” the translation of “Continual Conversation With a Silent Man” enacts only minor refractions of the original’s formal and rhetorical features. As a result, the overall effect of the original poem is replicated in the translation. The ambiguous nature of the individual’s relation to the conflictive world of intersubjectivity is not clarified or processed in any significant way in Rodríguez Feliú’s translation; the figures of sound (“el sonido”), man (“el otro hombre”), and monster (“un monstruo azul turquesa”) are cloaked with the same frustrating ambiguity. Furthermore, the threat that the monster evokes in the original is amplified in the translation of the final line: “un monstruo azul turquesa que nos ronda.” (18) (“a turquoise monster that circles in on us.”) The verb “rondar” suggests a more predatory relationship between the monstrous Other and the individual enclosed in his domestic space, whereas the original suggests a directionless movement without the same purposefulness (“moving round”). The translation thus dramatizes the threat that the sphere of intersubjectivity presents to the individual subject, suggesting that the Other’s presence in that sphere threatens to devour the individual subjectivity. The result of these



implications is a statement, even more forceful than Stevens's, of the necessity of an individuality based on one's own concrete experiences and, conversely, of the supreme danger of immersion in the storm of intersubjectivity.

Looking at the four translations as a whole, we see that Rodríguez Feliú continues the conversation between Stevens and Rodríguez Feo and processes the poems for incorporation into *Orígenes* in significant ways. "La casa y el mundo en calma" and "Caos móvil e inmóvil" make attenuations of Stevens's critique of reading, solipsism and romanticism. This act is consonant not only with Rodríguez Feo's stance in opposition to the North American poet, but also digests the originals for a less conflictive incorporation into *Orígenes*. As we have seen, the aesthetics of *Orígenes* does not emphasize realism and empiricism in the way Stevens does. The poetics of the journal tends toward the manipulation of symbols and valorizes intertextuality.

Rodríguez Feliú's radical incursion into "Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors" introduces religious symbolism that is totally alien to Stevens's poetics. This act anticipates Rodríguez Feo's introduction of the themes of Catholicism and mysticism into his conversation with Stevens in later correspondence. Further, it places the text in sympathetic relation to the religiosity of *Orígenes*.

After Stevens peruses Rodríguez Feliú's translations upon receiving number 8 of *Orígenes* in late February or early March of 1946, he describes a complex experience of recognition and estrangement. Rodríguez Feo assures Stevens in his letter of February 15 that the translations are of the highest order.<sup>11</sup> In his response Stevens seems to agree: "Of course, I know nothing about Spanish and cannot even pronounce it decently; yet it seems to me that Mr. Feliú has caught my particular rhythm. To me this seems to be

particularly true in the last few verses of the last poem [“Conversación”].” (80) These comments communicate the recognition of a facet of his own work in the translation, which is a pleasant experience for the poet, who twice expresses his thanks to the translator.

Yet, later in his letter, Stevens relates his sense that the poems he submitted no longer seem relevant, authentic, or effective. This sense develops out of a contrast between the real suffering of postwar Europe and the “unreal[ity]” of his poems:

It is a curious experience to read poems like those that have just appeared in *Orígenes* after the lapse of six months or more from the time when they were written ... The misery of Europe, which was greater six months ago than it is now, seems not to have been so real to us as it is now; and the more real it becomes the more sharply one feels that poetry of this sort is academic and unreal. One is inclined, therefore, to sympathize with one’s more unsympathetic critics. (81)

Stevens is spurred to the summary judgment that his poems no longer possess any force as an avocation of realism. Instead, they have ironically come to seem “unreal” themselves.

This judgment is perhaps driven by the incongruity between the real violence that has produced Europe’s “misery” and the placid mood evoked by the dove, Stevens’s poetic emblem of reality in “Thinking of the Relation Between the Images of Metaphors.” As we have seen, “Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion” and “Continual Conversation with a Silent Man” both associate violence with solipsism and intersubjectivity, respectively, through the common image of the storm. Yet the reality

Stevens contemplates in war's aftermath is not subjective. To stage the drama of the pure revelation of objective reality in the idyllic setting of "Thinking" paradoxically comes to represent the same solipsistic evasion practiced by the reader in "The World Was Quiet and the House Was Calm."<sup>12</sup>

Yet, to explain Stevens's lament in terms of the internal contradictions of the original texts is not fully satisfactory. Though Stevens comments on the value of his original work in relation to the reality of the moment, his reaction is sparked by "reading" the translations of those poems. Contemplating the texts in their transmuted form seems to have defamiliarized them and contributed to Stevens's negative verdict. Because of his limited grasp of the Spanish language, reading the poems out loud to himself, Stevens experiences his own work as something impenetrable and alien. This experience amplifies and dramatizes the aforementioned inner sense that his texts have drifted away from their original metapoetic impulse.

Stevens's comments illustrate a fascinating and rarely discussed effect of translation. Not only does it reshape a text for incorporation into a new context, but it also can provoke significant responses from the author of the original. The translation, in this sense, offers a kind of feedback that affects the producer of the original. It is thus an active force, not only within the target context, but within the context of the production of the original text as well.

It can be speculated, then, that this feedback through translation might affect Stevens's thinking. The fact that the translation leads the poet to question the means by which he espouses his empiricist project suggests that we might find alterations in how that content is framed in the future. More radically, the experience of defamiliarization

might impel the poet toward a questioning of the concept itself. On a different level, it can be speculated that Stevens's experience leads him to think differently about the nature of translation itself, recognizing the fundamental refocusing that can occur. As we will see, in the poem "Attempt to Discover Life," Stevens writes a poem that requests a radical rewriting. It is tempting to draw a connection between this new approach to translation and the poet's unsettling (and perhaps transformative) experience of reading his own work in translation.

### **Metaphysical and Empirical Bases for Literature**

After the publication of *Cuatro Poemas*, Rodríguez Feo sends Stevens a letter, dated October 9, 1945, in which he continues his established strategy of using textual references to assert his own intellectual agenda and resist Stevens's aesthetic and philosophical assertions. Rodríguez Feo makes a pointed assertion through his praise for Baron Jakob von Uexküll's *Bausteine zu einer biologischen Weltanschauung: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (1913). He asserts that "...this great biologist comes to the conclusion that life's origin cannot be explained by material motives, refuting Darwin, and that Plato was nearer to the truth when he imagined the archetypes as the sources of all our ideas and beings. Curious, eh?" (69). This reference responds to Stevens's assertions of the primacy of empirical activity in his intellectual system. Again, Rodríguez Feo resists Stevens's empiricism through a reference to Plato, a figure who has now become a central figure in the Cuban intellectual's distinctly allusive method for asserting his own philosophical idealism. As we have seen, as in the letter of July 1945, Stevens picks up

on Rodríguez Feo's assertion of Platonism as a clear statement of opposition, a fact that, in turn, motivates the Cuban's continued use of the term.

Yet, Rodríguez Feo does not fully engage his correspondent on the issues of empiricism and idealism; his comments are marked instead by a degree of evasion that has come to characterize his responses. As we have seen, the evasive tactics of refraining from translating or even commenting on Stevens's four submitted poems opens a discursive space for the initiation of new lines of inquiry. Asserting an interest in the theorization of a non-physical origin for life is a somewhat oblique response to Stevens's avocation of a poetics grounded on observation and meditation. It does not directly refute the importance of these processes, but rather shifts the focus of inquiry to the question of origins. Engaging in a debate strictly defined by Stevens's interest in the poetic usefulness of intellectual programatics (driven by his particularly focused interest on the epistemological status of the poetic image) would not allow Rodríguez Feo to fully air his own concerns. The Cuban intellectual obviously does admire the North American poet's imagistic thinking, but still wishes to engage him on questions that probe spiritual beliefs. After broaching the issue of the nature of life's origins, Rodríguez Feo mentions that he has recently read Paul Claudel's play *L'Annonce Faite à Marie, mystère en quatre actes et un prologue* (1912), a work that epitomizes the French author's mystical Catholicism. Rodríguez Feo's allusive method persistently steers the conversation from poetic to theological questions.

Later in the same letter, Rodríguez Feo builds upon this discursive turn in the evocation of a mystic poetics that clearly refutes Stevens's meditative methodology. The Cuban expresses great interest in a letter from Arthur Rimbaud to his former teacher

Georges Izambard in which the adolescent French poet describes the role of the poet in distinctly mystical terms. In Rodríguez Feo's paraphrase, Rimbaud asserts that the poet must be "...a seer who must become a medium through a long and reasonable effort and thus disintegrate his *senses* until he arrives at the Unknown" (70).<sup>13</sup> The profound effort necessary to arrive at the revelation that the poetic act facilitates is also important to the meditative discipline Stevens outlines, though the similarities end there. Stevens does not advocate the abdication of individual agency implied in Rimbaud's comments when the French poet asserts: "It's wrong to say *I think*: one should say *I am thought*" (28). More significantly, the mystic practice of superceding the sensory faculties in order to facilitate a spiritual apprehension directly contradicts Stevens's assertion of the necessity of building poetic composites out of sensory information. Rimbaud's mystic method involves an arduous trip through a realm of sensory darkness toward an elusive destination in the illumination of the "Unknown." Stevens's poetics posits, if tentatively, the continuous presence of the knowable in the light of an arduous empiricism.

Stevens's response continues the method of evasion that both correspondents have now developed, avoiding the issues Rodríguez Feo raises and continuing instead with the exposition of his own methodology. In his letter of October 17, 1945, Stevens seeks to instruct Rodríguez Feo in a particular meditative discipline, a way of considering general propositions through images. He does so by drawing on seemingly insignificant figures Rodríguez Feo himself has evoked in a description of his rural residence, Villa Olga. These figures consist of a black cook; Lucera, a cow; and Pompilio, a mule. Throughout, Stevens maintains a serious tone in spite of the comical banality of the images he seizes on to illustrate his propositions, a deliberate method meant to illustrate that nearly any

image, no matter how homely, can serve as a vehicle for meditation if approached seriously. Anticipating his correspondent's likely reaction, he pauses to assert: "[t]his is much more serious than you are likely to think from the first reading of this letter" (72).

In Stevens's meditative method, images arrange themselves in such a way that they begin to suggest an argument. Thus, Villa Olga's residents—a black man, a cow, and a donkey—come to represent ignorance, a quality Stevens allies with realism.<sup>14</sup> Ignorance is of great value because education clutters the mind with abstract ideas that interfere with clear perception. Pompilio is not burdened with received ideas, and thus "...does not have to divest himself of anything to see things as they are" (72). With continued comic seriousness, Stevens warns Rodríguez Feo not to contaminate Pompilio's blank mind with realities that cannot be directly experienced: "You won't forget to take a look at Pompilio from my point of view. Don't paint a picture of the hereafter for him. Don't tell him about the wonderful weather in your Eastern provinces. Give him a bunch of carrots and swear at him in a decent way, just to show your interest in reality" (73-4). Stevens counterposes these opinions to Rodríguez Feo's insistence on a theological element in his poetic thinking, asserting that "...[t]he elaboration of the most commonplace ideas as, for example, the idea of God, has been terribly destructive..." of the realist ideal that Pompilio represents (72). If Rodríguez Feo hopes to introduce theological concerns into the conversation, Stevens clearly refuses to cooperate.

Stevens continues his defense of realism through a forcefully restated aversion to reading:

This [discourse] has left me very little space to speak of things that you have been reading. I think, therefore, that I shan't speak of them at all, but instead try to raise a question in your mind as to the value of reading. True, the desire to read is an insatiable desire and you must read. Nevertheless, you must also think.

Intellectual isolation loses value in an existence of books. I think I sent you some time ago a quotation from Henry James about living in a world of creation. A world of creation is one of the areas, and only one, of the world of thought and there is no passion like the passion of thinking[,] which grows stronger as one grows older, even though one never thinks anything of particular interest to anyone else. Spend an hour or two a day even if in the beginning you are staggered by the confusion and aimlessness of your thoughts. (73)

It is initially quite striking how the strategy of evasion we have seen employed by both correspondents is so openly evidenced at the opening of these comments; it has become an mutually recognized rule of their particular conversation game. Yet, this evasion is immediately counterbalanced by the personal tone and conviction with which Stevens reiterates and develops his assertions. When he asserts that he will attempt to "raise a question" in the mind of Rodríguez Feo, he evidences an uncharacteristically personal engagement with his correspondent.

Stevens's restatement of his objection to bibliophilia revisits the underlying assertions of his recently submitted poems through a repeated connection between the practice of reading and desire. Like the speaker of his recently published poem, Stevens diminishes the epistemological value of reading by so closely relating reading to desire, a force that is at odds with reason and perception.



Stevens assumes the role of a teacher who hopes to impart a methodology to his student. He even gives Rodríguez Feo an explicit assignment to practice a kind of meditation on his own. On the one hand, it is right to note a move to establish a position of power over his correspondent. Yet this power, even if successfully exerted, is not total, as what Stevens pushes Rodríguez Feo to do is not to adopt a doctrine or set of intellectual precepts, but rather to try a methodology aimed at producing an individual result for each practitioner.

This distinction underlines the basic philosophical assumptions behind Stevens's assertions. His aversion to erudition and his espousal of "intellectual isolation" betray a strong belief in the ability of the self to generate its own form of knowledge. The foundation of his comments is a conviction that each person, in response to his or her sensory experience, can produce new concepts that, undisturbed by received ideas, originate at the point of intersection between a wholly independent subjectivity and a wholly external world. It is essential to pay explicit notice to this principle, as it undercuts the notion of Stevens's imperialism or exoticism: Stevens's engagement with an Other, though chronically symptomatic of cultural ignorance typical of a man of his cultural position and moment, is structured by an interest in that Other's individuality.

Rodríguez Feo's reply, written on October 20, 1945, continues the complex method of negotiation with Stevens's assertions that we have seen thus far. Again, he responds to Stevens's seriousness with a gently deflating irony: "I was delighted to read the little discourse on my animals (they are not worthy of such elegant attention)..." (74). He literally diminishes Stevens's rhetorical exercise ("little discourse") while simultaneously expressing gratitude for the gesture. He also agrees with Stevens on the

value of ignorance and on the importance of intense, isolated thinking, though he later refers to the second activity jokingly as “...our daily exercises of gymnastic thought” (75). It is clear from this response that Stevens is exerting little influence on his correspondent’s intellectual projects; we instead see a contrapuntal dialogue sustained between the two rather than a unidirectional flow of influence.

### **“Attempt to Discover Life”: Expanding the Means of Discursive Engagement**

Despite the moments of evasion and resistance that we have noted so far, Rodríguez Feo does make gestures of sympathetic participation in Stevens’s discursive games. An example occurs in the postscript to Rodríguez Feo’s letter of October 20, where he offers to continue the same “little discourse” on farm animals he has ironically deflated. Signing the letter with “An affectionate embrace,” (75) he asks: “Did I ever talk to you of *Linda*, my lovely (she) dog—how do you say *perra* [female dog]?” (75). He thus works to maintain the familiarity and openness his dialogue with Stevens has taken on, in spite of his obvious skepticism about the explanatory value of the poet’s musings on donkeys and cows.

These gestures lead to Rodríguez Feo’s description of a health resort at San Miguel de los Baños where the young man is convalescing, a site with natural mineral baths with purported therapeutic qualities. Rodríguez Feo observes how images of the Cuban countryside have ignited the imagination of his distant correspondent and, more significantly, facilitated a continuing discussion on the proper approach to empirical experience. He therefore offers up more images in order to see what Stevens might do

with them. He thus continues a line of imagistic dialogue as a means for acquiring a fuller understanding of the poet's thinking. He writes of San Miguel:

It is a lovely little village, surrounded by high lomas (hills). The vegetation is very puritanical in appearance; mostly palm trees—no flowers. In the evening I meet some of the town's capitanes (that's how we call here the Chinese) and play dominoes.... most of the time I just sit and watch the modest citizens (really very poor) walk about, selling lottery tickets or marching about the streets with their sad-looking horses to incite some rich sick-visitor to take a hike on horses and win therefore a few pesos. (82)

Rodríguez Feo's description both evokes a scene that would be familiar to Stevens and punctuates that scene with assertions of a foreign specificity. The description of the landscape as "puritanical" employs a term associated with Stevens's New England milieu, establishing a conceptual connection with what is familiar to the older poet. On the other hand, the conscious use of Spanish words—"lomas," "capitan[e]s"—highlights the place's foreignness.

For Roberto Ignacio Díaz, Rodríguez Feo panders to Stevens's patronizing exoticism by purveying imagery such as this, though a close examination of Stevens's use of that imagery in his poetic response—"Attempt to Discover Life"—reveals that it works in the service of a critical exoticism like the one found in "Academic Discourse at Havana." This critical exoticism makes use of Cuban imagery to explore philosophical problems and does so by means of images that evoke destruction instead of the vibrancy that typically marks exotic images of tropical locales. Rather than describe an exhilarating experience of the culturally unfamiliar, the poem questions the very value of

exotic experience itself. Stevens himself declares that the setting, like that of “Discourse,” is not meant to give the reader a photographic representation of an unfamiliar cultural reality, but rather to show up its own unreal and symbolic nature in order to engage in a questioning of the reality of what is seen in the exotic encounter: “...the San Miguel of the poem is a spiritual not a physical place. The question that is prompted by that poem is whether the experience of life is in the end worth more than tuppence: dos centavos” (91). Yet, as we will see, this questioning of the value of experience diverges from the tentative avocation of realism in “Discourse.” Whereas the earlier poem announces the project of a new, clearer way of seeing (modeled after the “white moonlight”), the later poem questions the authenticity of what is visible, and thus opens no clear path toward an empirical goal.

Stevens builds up an image of this “spiritual place” by lifting elements from Rodríguez Feo’s description and employing them in a new poetic context. Yet, Stevens’s use of these elements is geared toward the visual evocation of a collage of the unreal rather than the composition of a tourist photograph. The poem’s most evident example of this is the various roses that form its visual focal point:

At San Miguel de los Baños,  
The waitress heaped up black Hermosas  
In the magnificence of a volcano.  
Round them she spilled the roses  
Of the place, blue and green, both streaked,  
And white roses shaded emerald on petals  
Out of the deadliest heat. (1-7)

The description of flowers of any kind is in itself a divergence from the “reality” that Rodríguez Feo describes; the “puritanical” setting of the actual resort is devoid of flowers. Furthermore, Hermosas are a variety of rose with a small, light-pink bloom; they are never black. Blue roses do not exist. The green rose, the *R. chinensis viridiflora*, does not have petals, but long, spiky sepals; it is not really the “rose of [any] place,” as it appears generally as a curiosity in the gardens of horticulturists. It is clear to the reader who considers these facts that the poem’s setting may seem to the implicit observer within the text like a vibrant exposition of a cultural specificity and authenticity, but to the alert reader, it is a setting artificially arranged to cater to the aesthetic desires of that very observer.

The experience that the poem evaluates is thus artificial from the outset. In contrast to the empirical experience of the fisherman in “Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors,” the poem depicts a spectacle performed for a tourist. The poem’s second strophe narrates the entrance of “a cadaverous person” (8)

Who bowed and, bowing, brought, in her mantilla,  
A woman brilliant and pallid-skinned,  
Of fiery eyes and long thin arms.  
She stood with him at the table,  
Smiling and wetting her lips  
In the heavy air. (9-14)

The action suggests a service being offered to a customer. The roses are placed in a lavish display as if for a tourist, and the woman who smiles and wets her lips suggests someone paid to provide an erotic performance or service. In the context of this potential

sexual exchange, the “deadliest heat,” the “volcano” of roses, and the mysterious woman’s “fiery eyes” together evoke a passionate desire that verges on the destructive. Yet the aesthetics of the scene are by no means erotically evocative.

Instead, the heat that is repeatedly evoked suggests a feverish illness; it is described as “deadly” at line 7, a description that is complemented by the appearance of the “cadaverous person.” Even the impossible colors of the roses come to suggest a vision distorted by fever. The scene’s unreality is thus linked to the subjective experience of sickness.

It becomes clear in the enigmatic final strophe of the poem that a strange form of treatment for this illness is the central experience of the poem. The treatment for the fever is paradoxically formulated out of the heat of a spectacular fire, as the volcano of roses erupts, sending burning petals floating into the air:

The green roses drifted up from the table  
In smoke. The blue petals became  
The yellowing fomentations of effulgence,  
Among fomentations of black bloom and white bloom.  
The cadaverous persons were dispelled.  
On the table near which they stood  
Two coins were lying—dos centavos. (15-21)

“Fomentations,” in their etymological sense, are medicinal poultices or compresses, which employ moisture and heat to therapeutic effect. The use of the term thus suggests that such is the purpose of the poem’s bizarre spectacle. Stevens draws on both Rodríguez Feo’s description and his own imagination in devising the image, in that the

fomentations are a peculiar imagistic conflation of the healing waters of San Miguel and the imagined fire. The commercial usage of the “therapy” responds as well to Rodríguez Feo’s description of the men “...marching about the streets with their sad-looking horses to incite some rich sick-visitor to take a hike on horses and win therefore a few pesos.” The “cadaverous persons” have been hired to enact a kind of healing ritual for a sickly visitor. The “black bloom and white bloom” (18) thus are applied to the feverish vision of the tourist-patient like a salve.

In this context, the poem dramatizes exoticism as an attempt to regain vitality in the face of a spiritual and intellectual illness. Stevens asserts that the setting is “spiritual” rather than physical; thus the vitality that the implicit client seeks to gain must not be read literally. Instead, the poem stages a scene of spiritual malaise, a lack for which the extravagant spectacle attempts to compensate. The terms “brilliant” (10) and “effulgence” (17), suggest a spiritual enlightenment promised by the spectacle.

Yet that promise seems to go unfulfilled. The failure of the spectacle to heal this inner illness is implicit in the very term “fomentations,” whose other sense—something that incites suffering—contradicts its etymological origin. The burning flowers incite injury as much as they heal. As a result, the spiritual illness that the poem dramatizes remains incurable.

A parallel tension also emerges when we examine the poem as a whole. The spiritual “effulgence” of the flowers and the “brilliance” of the woman, each promising a kind of healing insight, are counterbalanced by that same woman’s “fiery eyes,” which in a literal sense reflect the light of the fire that consumes the roses. Fire represents a destructive force, its heat exacerbating the viewer’s fever as well as the “deadly”

atmosphere of the scene. The mirroring of the destructive fire of the spectacle in the eyes of the nameless woman is significant. The woman who is in one sense objectified and commodified by the implicit transaction that takes place in the poem is given a gaze invested with fire's potency. She is, like the dove in "Unidad de las imágenes," an object that gazes back at the subject, in a similarly threatening dynamic, in a Lacanian sense. The illness of the viewer generates the desire for the salve, or "fomentation," yet the cure hides a dangerous force that is directed back at the viewer through the eyes of the woman, inflaming the psychological and spiritual site of the illness. The poem's closing words, "dos centavos" ("two cents"), thus announce a skeptical verdict on the value of the experience that the poem dramatizes. This verdict reflects these irreconcilable contradictions and gives them the sense of an ultimate failure.

At first, the spectacle seems to open itself to the desirous gaze of the tourist, exemplifying the alliance between the exotic and the erotic. Nonetheless, as we have established, the spectacle does not satisfy the viewer's desire; the "fiery" gaze of the objectified woman undermines the power position of the viewer. This inadequacy is aligned with the illness. Thus it is both the source of the desire for the healing spectacle, and what that spectacle paradoxically exacerbates. The investment of the object's gaze with destructive potential dramatizes this scopic reversal.

### **From "Attempt to Discover Life" to "Tentativa por Descubrir la Vida"**

In contrast to the four poems Stevens sent Rodríguez Feo in the summer of 1945, the use of imagery in "Attempt to Discover Life" is enigmatic and laconic in a way that other short poems by Stevens are not. There is normally a discursive thrust to his shorter



lyrics that engages a philosophical or aesthetic issue and progresses through one or more explicit or implicit statements. “Attempt,” on the other hand, has a cinematic feel, piecing together still images and short actions in sequence with minimal extra-narrative information to help the reader place the sequence in a clarifying context.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the poem has little resonance with Stevens’s typical shorter poems. In addition to its laconic nature, it lacks the deft, often virtuosic musical effects that are characteristic of what most readers consider Stevens’s best works. The first strophe, for example, is surprisingly flat in tone and rhythm. Line 9, in the second strophe, is purposefully clumsy, with its three commas and its blunt alliteration: “Who bowed and, bowing, brought, in her mantilla...” Thus, “Attempt to Discover Life” does not read like a Stevens poem; it is not an example of his masterful stylistics.

This fact points the reader in the direction of Stevens’s true intention in allowing Rodríguez Feo to translate the poem for *Orígenes*. The poet’s agenda is not to leave his poetic *imprimatur* upon a foreign textual formation, where it would stand apart as testament to his mastery. It is clear that such has not been Stevens’s goal from the beginning. As we have seen in the case of the first four poems he contributes, he is more interested in using poems to continue a dialogue. With “Attempt,” he continues that project and extends its scope. Not only does the poem continue an examination of the issues Stevens and Rodríguez Feo treat in their correspondence, but further, it provokes a more engaged response from his counterpart by its very laconic, almost incomplete nature. The aforementioned interpretive difficulties that the text causes stem from the fact that the poem is purposefully schematic in construction.

I thus argue that the text is essentially a poem-to-be translated, the template for a text in Spanish. Knowing this, we can better understand Stevens's use of Cuban imagery. The use of that imagery is clearly deployed in a request that Rodríguez Feo create something out of the materials of his own local context. In this way, Stevens hopes his counterpart will put into action his earlier assertion to Henry Church that the local context should be his creative "matrix." This maternal metaphor for the proper inspiration for creative activity encounters a striking resonance in the diction of Rodríguez Feo's translation, as we will see.

While the original poem engages the issue of exoticism in a critical fashion, as we have established, the very presuppositions behind the poem's existence as a text processed and refashioned by a Cuban translator deepens that criticism. The result is a clear anti-exoticist gesture. The text refuses to process the concrete imagery of a tropical locale (imagery afforded by Rodríguez Feo in his letters) for exoticist use. Instead, in its function as a template or schema, it transfers agency for cultural representation from outsider to insider. Its imagery bears invisible question marks; the incompleteness of its arrangement coalesces into a series of inquiries about the possible uses of Cuban imagery. These questions open a dialogic space in which the translation can furnish an answer.

In his translation, Rodríguez Feo faithfully conveys the narration of the construction of the "volcano" of flowers and the entrance of the "cadaverous person" with the mysterious woman. He makes no significant creative interventions until the end of the second strophe, when he enacts a surprising recasting of signification. Where the original describes the woman "Smiling and wetting her lips/ In the heavy air" (13-14); the

translation has her: “Sonriendo y humedeciendo sus labios/ En el aire grávido” (13-14) (“Smiling and wetting her lips/ In the [pregnant/full/abundant/heavy] air”). Whereas the original uses the adjective “heavy” to evoke an atmosphere of oppressive heat, the translation introduces “grávido,” a term that etymologically means “heavy,” but which also means “pregnant.” This choice seizes on a term of lesser impact in the original (“heavy”) and layers it with more denotative and connotative resonance. The concept of an impending birth introduces a faint suggestion of redemption into a dark scene. More specifically, the “pregnant air,” in a relation of proximity to the displayed sexuality of the anonymous woman, shades that sexuality with the sense of a generative power, in contrast to the evocation of a sexually oppressive social context in the original.

Redemption and rebirth suggest themselves meekly by way of contrast to the atmosphere of illness evoked by the cadaverous persons of the first two strophes. The positive tone with which Rodríguez Feo responds to the image of the cadaverous person is significant in this context. The translator perceives a supernatural potential in a scene of illness. The second of Rodríguez Feo’s significant interventions supports this inference. The final strophe begins:

Las rosas verdes surgieron de la mesa  
En humo. Los pétalos azules tornáronse  
En los ensayos amarillentos del fulgor,  
Entre ensayos de florecer negro y florecer blanco. (15-18)

The green roses rose from the table  
In smoke. The blue petals became

In<sup>16</sup> yellowish essays of brilliance,

Among essays of black blooming and white blooming.

This translation erases the pharmacological sense of “fomentations.” As the “fomentations” of the original become “essays,” there is no longer the sense of heat or fire as a form of negative incitation. Instead, the word “essays” suggests an attempt or an endeavor whose outcome is uncertain, but whose initial impulse is generally positive. An “essay” / “ensayo” is also literally a weighing (from the Latin *exagium*), a means of evaluation. The term thus underlines the sense of the poem’s title, as well as introducing the concept of a means of measurement for the success or failure of the “attempt to discover life.” Whereas the original employs the term “fomentations” to maintain the relevance of the theme of sickness, the translation disengages with that theme, clearing connotative space for a more positive assertion.

This positive assertion comes in the last significant alteration in the translation. The word “bloom” in the original is clearly a noun rather than a verb. Yet Rodríguez Feo renders the word as “florece,” an infinitive verb (“to bloom”). Here it is used as a gerund, to mean “blooming.”<sup>17</sup> The translation moves away from the image of the rose petals serving as poultices, which focuses on the physical substance of the blossoms. Rodríguez Feo’s image of “black blooming and white blooming” creates a wholly different image, one in which the fire is no longer destructive, but instead enacts a productive activity. The original suggests that the flowers are consumed by the fire; the gerunds employed in the translation evoke a generative activity rather than a consumption.

This positive connotation works sympathetically with the idea of new life encoded in the term “grávido.” Together, they suggest a possible flourishing, a rebirth that emerges from the fire. The redemption that these connotations evoke nonetheless remains a potential. Noting the use of the term “ensayos,” it is clear that the experience that the poem stages is on trial. It is, in the most literal sense, being weighed. The two coins with which the poem closes appear on the opposite side of the balanced scale, forming a representation of the value of the experience. In contrast to the original, it is unclear how to read the connotations of the “dos centavos” in the translation. Within the more optimistic context that the translation’s diction establishes, it is difficult to judge if those two cents are to be taken as such a paltry sum.

In the translation, there is less skepticism about the value of the artificial experience that the cadaverous persons offer to the viewer than in the original, in part because in the original, exoticism forms a more relevant context for that experience. In the original, the aforementioned markers of Cuban cultural specificity call forth the question of authenticity when read from the point of view of a North American reader, who, by the mechanics of the poem’s narration, is allied with the implicit viewer. The foreign-sounding locale, the strange people and even stranger spectacle call forth exoticism within that domestic readerly context, and the poem subsequently offers a negative assessment of the value of that experience, going so far as to detect an intellectual and spiritual listlessness at the heart of the exotic gaze.

The translation that appears in *Orígenes*, on the other hand, interpolates to some extent a Cuban or generally Hispanic reader whose imagination does not proceed across the same cultural trajectory. As a result, the strangeness of the spectacle at the heart of

the poem might be striking, but it cannot represent the *exotic* in the same sense it would to a reader from the English-speaking world, because it is not shaped by the same political, economic and cultural conditions of reception.

Stevens, as we have established, designs the text as a poem-to-be-translated. He does so as an anti-exoticist act, encouraging a completion of the poem's schematics from a translational position within the culture that is so often exoticized by U.S. authors. Working from these conditions, Rodríguez Feo renders a text with divergent implications, an act that reaffirms the intentions of Stevens's textual gesture. As a result, the experience that the translation evaluates is not enclosed within the confounding epistemological problematics of exoticism, but rather comes to represent the possibility for magic transformations and spiritual rebirth.

### **Individuality and Realism: The Question of Abstraction in Poetry and Painting**

The final stage of Rodríguez Feo and Stevens's textual dialogue centers on the topic of the visual arts. As we will see, in their discussions of artists and their work, the two interlocutors expound their personal aesthetics. First, we will see Stevens inflecting his emphasis on empiricism with a notion of individual authenticity. Then, we will observe how his definition of realism enters into a sympathetic dialogue with the question of abstraction. Finally, this phase of the dialogue leads to Rodríguez Feo's translation and publication of Stevens's essay "The Relations between Poetry and Painting" in *Orígenes*. The essay continues the dialogue on artistic methodology unfolded in the correspondence, while also introducing Stevens's concept of the Supreme Fiction.

Through his submission of the essay, Stevens states both his skepticism about religion and the fictionalism that he suggests might supplant theology.

The connection between two art forms that Stevens asserts in the essay leads us to read his comments on painting as representative of an aesthetics that also applies to literature. In his comments on paintings, Stevens evidences an insistence on two fundamental concepts that apply to both disciplines: namely, a notion of creative authenticity and an empirical basis for imaginative work. In this sense, the visual arts, as a topic, afford the occasion for the continued development of his argument in favor of individuality and realism. Rodríguez Feo, on the other hand, asserts his own concept of authenticity, and affirms a transcendental or spiritual mode of artistic production. The assertions of both men enter into dialogue with one another through the various discursive and textual means we have seen throughout their interactions.

On April 9, 1949, Rodríguez Feo describes his reaction to a Havana exhibition of Mexican painting, contrasting the artificiality of the Mexican muralists with a truer Cuban form of artistic expression. He asserts that Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros are "...embarked upon an academic stage which reveals their decadence. The Cubans are less pretentious, more charming and some have produced works which surpassed the bloody, screaming, cultural and nationalistic propaganda of the mejicanos" (123). In Rodríguez Feo's estimation, the Mexican muralist movement has lost the cultural relevance it had enjoyed in the 1920s, becoming "academic" and "pretentious," in an essential betrayal of its populist political origins. A criterion of authenticity is implicit in these pejorative adjectives.

This concept of authenticity is consonant with the editorial statements, attributed to Rodríguez Feo and coeditor José Lezama Lima, in which *Orígenes* poses itself as a project that avoids propaganda and resists defining itself in relation to artistic generations, schools or dogmas. Rodríguez Feo asserts that Cuban art is more authentic because it does not bear the burden of maintaining itself as an “ism” and does not need to “scream” to be heard. Instead, he defines Cuban art as “charming,” suggesting that artistic authenticity is not to be confused with intensity of emotion and political belief.<sup>18</sup>

Wallace Stevens’s response to Rodríguez Feo’s statements on muralism is sympathetic. He laments how Mexican painting has developed a “generalized doctrine” and “undertake[s] to teach” rather than striving to be original (125). Yet, these notes of concurrence come by way of a negative assessment of the latest work of the *origenista* artist Mariano Rodríguez. Stevens was originally taken with the illustrations Mariano did in the early numbers of *Orígenes*.<sup>19</sup> Like Rodríguez Feo, Stevens at this point seems drawn to an aesthetics of charm and placidity rather than one of force and passion. At the Feigl Gallery in New York City in the spring of 1948, though, Stevens finds an entirely different Mariano. We do not know precisely what works were displayed, but it is clear that they emerge from a different aesthetic. In the mid-to-late 1940s, Mariano’s work takes on a more daring use of color and depicts massive, monumental human figures.<sup>20</sup>

Stevens is shocked by what he sees, describing the works as “lurid and rhetorical” (124). This characterization is posed in contrast to his own aesthetic values. In place of the lurid (the shocking, the sensational, the gruesome), Stevens values the cool and restrained qualities he finds in Mariano’s earlier drawings. Instead of a rhetorical (artificial, stylized) approach, Stevens values what appears natural.



Judging from these comments, it is tempting to assert that Stevens advocates an Apollonian, rather than a Dionysian aesthetic. Yet, in a letter dated December 14, 1948, Stevens praises the work of French painter and sculptor Jean Dubuffet and urges Rodríguez Feo to see it. Dubuffet's aggressive aesthetics is far from the placid beauty of Mariano's drawings in *Orígenes* or of the French landscapes Stevens so enthusiastically acquires for his own art collection. What Stevens admires about Dubuffet is not the aesthetic impression it makes on him as a viewer, but rather what he knows of the artist's rigorous methodology: "Jean Dubuffet goes to Africa in the winter and there he and his wife and his children ... live on the desert, in a tent, with the Arabs ... And there in the desert he struggles against everything that he has picked up at home in an effort to arrive at what he himself is and what he himself sees, feels and thinks" (148). The criterion for assessing the value of Dubuffet's art is not its aesthetic surface, but rather the rigor and honesty of the artist's effort to achieve a fully authentic mode of personal expression.

Thus, it becomes clear that Stevens does not react negatively to Mariano's style in itself, but rather what he extrapolates about the artist's methodology. When Stevens looks at a painting, he asks himself: how did the artist draw on "what he himself is and what he himself sees, feels and thinks" in order to produce this work? Along with the values of rigor and honesty, this question is built upon a fundamental link between artistic expression and personal individuality: "I just don't think Mariano is being himself ... There is not the slightest doubt that Mariano is an interesting figure. But a man does not achieve himself by willing to do something: he does it as part of the experience of himself: of living his own life in his own world" (125). It is important to

note that Stevens's standard of judgment relies upon a significant interpretive leap from the formal surface of the painting to what he believes to be its personal origins.

Stevens's opinions on art continue the argument for originality that he has made to José Rodríguez Feo in his comments about literature. At the same time, they push the idea of originality toward a nearly solipsistic description of the artistic process, as we can see in the phrase "the experience of himself." Rather than the idea of an art that reshapes observed reality, Stevens seems to insist on an art of introspection.<sup>21</sup> This suggestion strikes a discordant note with the parodies of solipsism and the attempts to embody a notion of pure realism we have seen in his poetry as well as his letters. The emphasis of Stevens's aesthetics seems to be shifting from empiricism to individualism.

Yet, in Stevens's reaction against the abstraction of Mariano's work, we see the value of realistic representation raised again.<sup>22</sup> His comments reveal his reaction against a particular kind of abstraction:

I think that all this abstract painting that is going on nowadays is just so much frustration and evasion. Eventually it will lead to a new reality. When a thing has been blurred by the obscurity of metaphysics and eventually emerges from that blur, it has all the characteristics of a brilliantly clear day after a month of mist and rain. (124)

Abstraction is a bivalent term here. In the first sense, it is an "evasion" of reality, a refusal to draw on empirical resources. When Stevens describes abstraction as a "metaphysics," he opposes it to a creative process built on empirical data. In the second sense, which is less prominent, abstraction is a movement that, despite its obfuscations, makes visible a "new reality." Stevens's positive statements to various correspondents

about Georges Braque, Paul Klee, and Jean Arp illustrate the fact that his aesthetics is not dogmatically representational.

Instead, we observe the same fact we noted in evaluating the criteria of rigor, authenticity and individuality—the imagined source of the aesthetic fact is primary in Stevens’s critiques. What the abstraction works *from* is most important to Stevens, rather than the abstraction itself. In “‘Beyond the Rhetorician’s Touch’: Stevens’s Painterly Abstractions,” Alan Filreis offers an illuminating interpretation of abstraction’s positive sense for Stevens: “a ‘new knowledge of reality’... was to be derived not from an unreflectively revived form of realism but from a realist’s assimilation of the abstractionist project itself” (246). In other words, Stevens saw in abstraction the possibility for a new way of perceiving reality. In support of this assertion, Filreis cites a letter to Barbara Church in which Stevens muses:

One wonders sometimes whether this is not exactly what the whole effort of modern art has been about: the attachment to real things. When people were painting cubist pictures, were they not attempting to get at not the invisible but the visible? They assumed that back of the peculiar reality that we see, there lay a more prismatic one of many facets. Apparently deviating from reality, they were trying to fix it... (Letters 601)

In these comments, we find a surprising reconciliation of Stevens’s realist project with abstraction. He allows a pictorial language like cubism an empirical purpose—the making visible of a concrete reality that was previously invisible because of limited ways of seeing. Stevens’s comments support Filreis’s assertion that, in the poet’s estimation,

“abstraction can lead uniquely and freshly back to reality” (Rhetorician 247). The two senses Stevens makes of abstraction parallel two modes of the imagination.

In his essay “Imagination as Value,” Stevens distinguishes “...between the imagination as metaphysics and as a power of the mind over external objects” (Angel 136). Through a quote from Ernst Cassirer, Stevens associates the first valence of the imagination with romanticism, Fichtean idealism, and the assertion that art is of supreme epistemological value (136). The second he describes as a movement toward a “visionary” experience that uses reality as its starting point. This second mode of imagination he associates with art in its true form (137). The purpose of this artistic (rather than romantic) imagination is a form of “abstraction” (139), whose primary operations are upon “external objects.”

If we read them in the broader context of Stevens’s general thinking about art, we can see his statements about artists such as Mariano and Dubuffet as a manifestation of a process of reconciling his two central concerns—reality and the imagination. Rodríguez Feo responds to Stevens’s ideas with assertions of his own. As we have seen, he lays out his anti-academic and antipropagandistic program for art in his comments about muralism, receiving a sympathetic response from Stevens. But in the case of the work of Jean Arp, Rodríguez Feo disagrees strongly. On January 27, 1949, Stevens recommends that Rodríguez Feo see an exhibit of Arp’s sculptures at the Gallery Matisse in New York, describing the French artist as “exquisite” and “a man of taste” (150). Stevens’s assessment is not surprising, given the organic forms that Arp’s sculptures typically assume. Arp’s abstraction is recognizably the result of a process that works *from* natural forms and develops an analytical presentation of those forms.

Yet, after seeing the exhibit, Rodríguez Feo responds to Stevens's enthusiasm with sarcasm.

I went to N.Y. just as I said and took a good look at Arpie; but I came back very disappointed. I guess that sort of Latin's delicacy is too much for us South of the Border. I found M. Arp geometrical a las Descartes, but who cares for French precision, classicism, razon. I took off to a little bar on second Avenue and got drunk. (152)

Rodríguez Feo, like Stevens, illustrates his aesthetic values through negative assessments. His description of Arp's work touches on both its aesthetic surface and its conceptual foundations. He dislikes its formal "delicacy" as well as the classical rationality ("raz[ón]") he believes it embodies. Rodríguez Feo establishes an implicit connection between art and everyday experience by contrasting the Apollonian repose of Arp's sculpture with Dionysian drunkenness, implying a preference for the latter.

Though it seems like nothing more than an offhand comment, Rodríguez Feo's statement of preference for drunkenness over classical repose is really a manifestation of an underlying aesthetic philosophy that is central to his thinking as a Cuban literary professional. This aesthetics is an opposition to what he describes as the "puritanism" of U.S. culture. This Puritanism consists of an inveterate repression of emotions of all kinds, in favor of a calculating rationality. As we have asserted before, Rodríguez Feo identifies himself (and Cuban culture) with a cultural and spiritual Catholicism that stands opposite a repressive Protestantism. Rodríguez Feo illustrates this opposition further when he describes to Stevens a lecture given by the French Catholic priest and poet Pierre Emmanuel at Princeton. The discourse was "...all about anguish, suffering,

the Crucifixion [sic] and Ressurrection (?) [sic], and I was much amused to see the expressions on the men of letters' snouts as they heard him undress his soul and told what made his poetry tick" (147). His parody of the reserved and repressed Princeton professors implies a valuation of Emmanuel's spirituality, acceptance (or even indulgence) of suffering, and the honesty with which he revealed those qualities to his audience.<sup>23</sup>

It is important to note that during this period in his correspondence with Stevens, Rodríguez Feo mentions St. John of the Cross on two occasions.<sup>24</sup> He continues to use the Spanish mystic as a means for asserting himself as a Catholic and for alluding to his own belief in a spiritual basis for art. His insistence on the importance of physical and spiritual suffering in his comments about Emmanuel is consistent with his interest in the Spanish mystic tradition, which is an important foundation for much of the religiosity and the poetics of *Orígenes*. As we will see, this religious element plays a role in the interaction between Stevens's "The Relations between Poetry and Painting" and its *Orígenes* context.

Leading up to the appearance of Stevens's essay on painting and poetry in *Orígenes* in 1952, two pieces published in the previous year help to round out our examination of the context for the essay's appearance. In issue number 28, two texts translated by Rodríguez Feo appear: "Braque," an essay on the French artist by Marcel Arland, and "Cuadernos" ("Notebooks"), a selection from Braque's famous aphorisms.<sup>25</sup> One of these aphorisms stands out as an anticipation of Stevens's essay: "El arte abstracto se lee, pero no se ve" ("Abstract art is read, but not seen") (35). Braque asserts an intersection between the textual and the visual in the sphere of modern art, a statement

that supports the agenda behind Stevens's essay—finding the essential commonalities between poetry and the visual arts.

The Arland essay parallels Stevens's interest in the creative methodology behind paintings. Arland praises Braque's discipline, his individuality, and his refusal to subscribe to the doctrines of any particular school (31-32). More significantly, Arland connects the disciplinary and methodological brilliance of Braque's work to a spiritual one. He asserts that his methodology possesses a "religious irradiation" ("irradiación religiosa"), and that his work as a whole "is a metaphysical world ... the world illuminated by Grace..." ("Es un mundo metafísico ... el mundo iluminado por la Gracia...") (34). These assertions interact dynamically with Stevens's exploration of the theological thrust behind modern art in "Relations," as we will see. Rodríguez Feo, as editor and translator, establishes this dynamic context for Stevens's essay by incorporating these texts by Arland and Braque into *Orígenes*.

Stevens's "The Relations between Poetry and Painting" attempts to illustrate the fundamental connection between two art forms. It does so in two ways, one descriptive and the other speculative. Stevens begins the essay by describing the most immediate manifestation of this connection: the fact that critical comments about paintings so often could apply just as well to poems (160-61). Then, he tackles the question of the technical similarities between poetry and painting, asserting that the concept of "composition" is common to both (161-63). He then moves to the issue of the shared organizing principles in modern art and modern poetry. Both are "uncompromising," or unwilling to deviate from its strict program (166-7), are "plausible," in that they each have a totalizing

tendency to find “a reason for everything” (167), and are “bigoted,” or opposed to the assertions of competing schools (167).

Stevens thus begins the essay in a descriptive mode of analysis. He subsequently makes a jarring transition to a speculative mode, wherein he proposes a Nietzschean theological and philosophical basis for the unity of poetry and painting. For Stevens, this unity is part of a broader commonality among the arts in the face of the death of God in modern Western societies. Stevens asserts that:

...in an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent ... poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost. Men feel that the imagination is the next greatest power to faith: the reigning prince. Consequently, their interest in the imagination and its work is to be regarded not as a phase of humanism but as a vital self-assertion in a world in which nothing but the self remains, if that remains. (170-1)

As religion declines as a means for making sense of human experience, art promises to fill the void. Stevens’s discussion of the technical affinities of modern art forms opens out dramatically to a diagnosis of the essential modern problem—the irrelevance of religion and of any other kind of totalizing ideology.

What will reanimate humanity’s capacity for belief is, of course, the Supreme Fiction: “Our own time ... is a time in which the search for the supreme truth has been a search in reality or through reality or even a search for some supremely acceptable fiction” (173). This new fiction is to be acknowledged as a wholly human creation, yet its role is to take the place of theology; it “...seems to become in time a mystical theology...” (173). The positive, rather than lamenting, tone with which Stevens



announces the triumph of fictionalism epitomizes a common tenet of Modernism, as described by Ellmann Crasnow: "...the fact that value has a human origin can prompt celebration instead of apology: the capacity to add meaning, to construct reality, will then be acknowledged as an essential human resource" (370). Stevens ultimately sees the triumph of fictionalism in modern thinking to be a positive development that rescues "[t]he greatest truth we could hope to discover ... that man's truth is the final resolution of everything" (175). Whereas to this point in his exchange with Rodríguez Feo, Stevens has sounded like a realist along the lines of William Carlos Williams, the forceful statements of "Relations" finally offer us an image of Stevens that fits what we understand as his role in U.S. Modernism.

It is at first surprising to note that Rodríguez Feo explicitly requests to publish this essay in *Orígenes*. Rodríguez Feo's translation and publication of Stevens's essay places the idea of the Supreme Fiction in direct confrontation with the religious foundations of *Orígenes*. We can see how Stevens's assertion that artistic activity replaces faith enters into a conflictive context in *Orígenes*. Even the poetic freedoms Lezama affirms are not human constructions meant to supplant religiosity. There is always a Catholic belief-system that undergirds the aesthetics of Lezama and the majority of *origenistas*, as heterodox as the poetic manifestations of those beliefs might be.

Rodríguez Feo explains to Stevens that his decision to publish "Relaciones" "...is due to Mariano's great interest in what you have to say there about his own art [painting generally]" (189). This comment reveals an important fact about Rodríguez Feo as editor and about *Orígenes* as a whole; the essay is not required to affirm beliefs consistent with the *origenista* agenda, but only to be considered of some kind of thematic relevance to

some feature of that program. Stevens's essay is indeed relevant to the connections among Rodríguez Feo, Stevens and Mariano, and to the dialogue about modern art (through letters as well as through texts published in *Orígenes*) that we have reconstructed heretofore. Rodríguez Feo clearly finds it valuable, rather than detrimental, that Stevens's essay would conflict with magazine's general tenets because that conflict is direct and topical.

Furthermore, though the conflict between the atheism behind Stevens's assertion of the Supreme Fiction and the theological bases of the journal in which the essay is published emerges as a surprising dissonance, it is important to keep in mind the sense in which the assertion rounds out Stevens's ideas about abstraction and realism.

Understanding this other implication of the Fiction's appearance, we can see how it engages in a more sympathetic dialogue with Rodríguez Feo's *origenismo*. As we have seen in our discussion of the "major man," the Supreme Fiction is a statement of Stevens's belief in the importance of coordinations and reconciliations between the concrete and the abstract. Stevens's long poem "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" elaborates, through improvisations and careful structural arrangements, a schema in which the concrete instance and abstract belief enter into dynamic interactions. In this light, we can see how the theological assertions of "The Relations between Poetry and Painting" are, in part, a restatement of Stevens's assertions about a specific kind of reconciliation between abstraction and realism, where each opposite is dependent upon the other.

This reconciliation is consonant with Rodríguez Feo's broader intellectual system. The Cuban translator and editor, like the North American poet, is interested in a synergy

of the concrete and the abstract. Rodríguez Feo's critical essays engage in a mode of historical critique that is more factual and specific than the prevailing *origenista* agenda of treating societal problems poetically and spiritually. Yet, this factual self exists alongside the mystical Rodríguez Feo, who resists Stevens's affirmations of the importance of a strict empiricism.

Thus, it is not surprising to see that Rodríguez Feo's translation of the essay is rigorously transparent on a linguistic level. The translation renders Stevens's atheist argument quite clearly, allowing the text to enter into a direct, conflictive relationship with the spiritual grounds of the magazine and the translator himself. There is only one significant alteration the translation—an omission—that refracts the original essay's intent in a significant way. Stevens's description of the disciplinary elements common to modern poetry and painting is attenuated by virtue of a missing sentence.<sup>26</sup> The flow of his argument is fairly well preserved in spite of its absence. The effect, then, is one of slight de-emphasis; a point Stevens attempts to make through a deliberate progression of assertions comes across with a measurable diminishment of clarity. The slight suppression that this omission represents suggests that the translation is less interested in the line of argument that threads through that passage of the text. Instead, it appears that it is the bold philosophical thesis with which the essay closes that is more important to the translation's process of confronting the original text with a new context.

## **Conclusion**

Our detailed and chronologically linear treatment of the literary dialogue sustained between Stevens and Rodríguez Feo has given us a sense of the substance and

duration of what must be one of the most fruitful literary exchanges of the period. First, we have come to appreciate the way in which the communication between the two figures steadily gains in momentum and in openness over the course of time, though we have also noticed pronounced moments of silence and evasion. Also, it is evident that, counter to the assertions of Roberto Ignacio Díaz, Stevens develops an interest in eliciting original responses from Rodríguez Feo, rather than imposing viewpoints upon him through a kind of cultural colonialism. We observe that both the prose and the poetic texts that make up Stevens's half of the interaction are dialogic, both in its origins and in its results. Stevens writes letters and poems *in response* to Rodríguez Feo, and his responses are gauged to continue, rather than forestall, discussion. His poem "Attempt to Discover Life" is the most interesting manifestation of this mode of expression. The intentional incompleteness of the text solicits a translational elaboration, resulting in a dynamic pairing of original and translation that continues multiple lines of dialogue through its contrapuntal textual body.

Rodríguez Feo's textual production—arguments, allusions, editorial and translational acts— participates in the same dialogic system that Stevens's does. Like his counterpart, he sustains an expression of his aesthetic, philosophical and religious convictions through a variety of textual processes. The result of his responses is a constellation of counterpoints that embodies the problematic relationship between his own identification with the *Orígenes* project and his interest in Stevens's skeptical, individualistic aesthetics. Through silence and irony, Rodríguez Feo refuses to enter into a subordinate discursive relation to the famous poet. In his assertions, allusions, and activities as editor and translator, he converts silence into encoded oppositions.

Deciphering the codes through which Rodríguez Feo puts forth his resistances, we discover, in more detail, how the young editor envisions the agendas of *Orígenes*. The thematics we have seen developed through this interaction center around the opposition between Stevens's emphasis on observation and individuality and of the *origenista* valuation of a metaphysical and collective mode of literary production. As we have seen, Rodríguez Feo's vision of the role of *Orígenes* results in gestures that resist (through argument) or reshape (through translation) Stevens's aesthetics for incorporation into *Orígenes*. At other times, though, we have seen how Rodríguez Feo allows Stevens's work to conflict with its new Cuban context in an unmediated way. In his translation of Stevens's "Four Poems," Óscar Rodríguez Feliú continues Rodríguez Feo's agenda in his reshaping of Stevens's empiricism and his introduction of sacred imagery into Stevens's discourse. These two modes of operation—one incorporative, the other contrapuntal—embody the duality of the two Cuban translators' functions in relation to *Orígenes*.

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## Notes to Chapter Two

<sup>1</sup> Brazeau's oral biography offers the reader a great deal of information about Stevens's life. Helen Vendler's book-length study is perhaps the most respected work on Stevens's long poems. Alan Filreis, in *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World*, gives a well-documented and carefully considered contextualization of Stevens's poetry in the historical events of the World War II period.

<sup>2</sup> Todorov asserts that the exoticist believes that "...the country with superior values is a country whose only relevant characteristic is that it is not my own." (264).

<sup>3</sup> The poem was originally published in *Broom* in 1923 as "Discourse in a Cantina at Havana," and was reprinted as "Academic Discourse at Havana" in *Hound and Horn* in 1929. The poem appears in translation as "Discurso académico en La Habana," in *revista de avance* in 1929.

<sup>4</sup> All Stevens poems cited in this study can be found in the *Collected Poems*. The earliest published version of each poem has been consulted, to assure that none of the divergences of a translation are attributable to a different version.

<sup>5</sup> Stevens makes this argument via an image from Plato. His rejection of the twice-abstracted image parallels Plato's skepticism about the epistemological value of art, though his insistence on the importance of the concrete world as a foundation of knowledge diverges sharply from Plato's argument for the abstract apprehension of Forms.

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<sup>6</sup> As Filreis and Coyle point out (62), Stevens found this passage in F. O. Matthiessen's *Henry James: The Major Phase* (1944). Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock later edited *The Notebooks of Henry James* (1947).

<sup>7</sup> As we will see in our examination of Allen Tate's essay "The New Provincialism," Rodríguez Feo's critique of the narrow cultural outlook of Cubans as a national group is in conflict with Tate's emphasis on the importance of an extremely focused localism.

<sup>8</sup> In Stevens's poem "The Pediment of Appearance," hunters are engaged in a search for the "transparence," the objective image, though they become lost in their own wills and the image they seek becomes a threatening mirror that "scowl[s]" back at them.

<sup>9</sup> For Lacan, the example *par excellence* of the returned gaze is the anamorphic skull in the foreground of Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors*. The skull's gaze, set in a scene meant to symbolize *vanitas*, undoes the vanity of the viewer (88). Because the field of the gaze is the field of desire (85), the challenge of the returned gaze is a challenge to the figure that organizes all desire—the phallus. In this context, we can understand how Holbein's painting "...makes visible ... the subject as annihilated..." through a symbolic castration (88-89).

<sup>10</sup> In Luke 5:10, Jesus says to Simon: "Do not be afraid. From now on you will be catching men."

<sup>11</sup> After perusing Rodríguez Feliú's translations, Rodríguez Feo remarks to Stevens in a letter dated February 15, 1946: "The translations are probably the best you can get; far superior to those made for *Sur* by [Jorge Luis] Borges and [Adolfo] Bioy

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[Casares]—and that is saying a great deal! I myself was astounded when Rodríguez Feliú handed them in for your poetry is quite difficult to apprehend and its flavour can escape easily a less conscious and artistic effort.” (79)

<sup>12</sup> Though it is clear that Stevens criticizes himself for straying from an engagement with reality, this criticism is in a sense unfair, according to the poet’s own strictly empirical definition of realism. Stevens’s dramatization of realism in “Thinking” emerges from memories of a natural environment he himself experienced as a child. The chaos of Europe, on the other hand, though real, is not a reality directly available to Stevens as experience.

<sup>13</sup> Rimbaud writes: “I want to be a poet, and I’m working to turn myself into a *seer*... It has to do with making your way toward the unknown by a derangement of *all the senses*. The suffering is tremendous, but one must bear up against it, to be born a poet, and I know that’s what I am. It’s not my fault. It’s wrong to say *I think*: one should say *I am thought*.” (28) It is interesting to note that the young poet was aware of the suffering that arises from the sacrificing one’s sensory existence. This amounts, in this context, to a recognition of the painful nature of the mystic discipline, a facet Rowan Williams seeks to make clear in his explication of St. John of the Cross, for whom “...it was fundamentally important to be able to interpret his mental anguish as itself ‘grace,’ the mark of God’s intimacy” (174).

<sup>14</sup> It is important to acknowledge the racism inherent in Stevens’s imagery. Nonetheless, this racism is not particularly relevant to the discursive relationship between Stevens and Rodríguez Feo.



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<sup>15</sup> The final two lines, for example, have the feel of a closeup that breaks away from the narrative sequence to place an explicit emphasis on an object or objects. Here, the reader is impelled to take the image of the two coins lying on the table as especially significant and subsequently to believe that the speaker emphatically minimizes the value of the “experience” that the poem represents.

<sup>16</sup> The insertion of the preposition “En” (“In”) is essentially an error, resulting in a sentence fragment. “Tornarse” means “to become,” which is a literal translation of the word “became” in the original. “Tornáronse en” (“became in”) is nonsensical, unless a comma is implicit between the verb and the preposition, which would lead to the statement of a predicate for the verb (“became[,] in...”) Notwithstanding this basic problem, I wish to focus on the rich semantic significance of the term “ensayos.”

<sup>17</sup> In Spanish, two distinct words designate the flower (“flor”) and the act of blossoming (“florecer”).

<sup>18</sup> Just two years earlier, *Orígenes* devoted the entire spring, 1947 issue to Mexico, with a cover by José Clemente Orozco, an essay by Alfonso Reyes, and poetry by Alí Chumacero, Efraín Huerta and Octavio Paz. Rodríguez Feo and Lezama penned a preface praising the “splendid muralist tradition” (“su espléndida tradición muralista”) (3), and the issue included a promotional statement by Justino Fernández that marveled at the “novelty and vital force” (“la novedad y fuerza vital”) (28) of muralism in the 1940s. Rodríguez Feo’s comments on April 9, 1948 mark the first clear assertion of muralism’s “decadence,” which he claims to have “suspected all the time,” in spite of his role in producing the homage (Secretaries 123).

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<sup>19</sup> After seeing the magazine for the first time in January of 1945, Stevens remarks: “Mariano’s happy little drawings touch me (Mariano is in fact exquisite). Nothing quite so unconcerned has come my way for a long time. Man’s fever is not present here” (35).

<sup>20</sup> For collections of Mariano’s work, see Rodríguez, *Mariano: una energía voluptuosa* and *Todos los colores de Mariano*.

<sup>21</sup> In a letter to Barbara Church dated June 22, 1948, Stevens confesses that what he has lately been searching for in philosophical treatises is explorations of the “...question of my relation to things about me” (Letters 601).

<sup>22</sup> In 1948, Mariano’s work still had strong representational elements in it, with significant parallels with the cubist work of Picasso and Georges Braque. In the 1960s, Mariano executed truly “abstract” paintings that Stevens most likely would have enjoyed even less.

<sup>23</sup> The atmosphere of Princeton University, where he is pursuing graduate studies, seems to Rodríguez Feo the embodiment of American puritanism. In his letter of November 15, 1948, Rodríguez Feo asks: “How can we cultivate the passions in Princeton. [sic] They dry up here and we float through the campus, classes and Firestone library a disembodied body, pure spirit, in the air like a gas-balloon” (139).

<sup>24</sup> In his letter of Dec. 15, 1948, Rodríguez Feo mentions that his own birthday (December 28) is the same day St. John of the Cross died (148). A letter from January, 1949, recounts Rodríguez Feo’s reference to the Spanish mystic in a question to art

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historian Suzanne Langer. Rodríguez Feo was frustrated that Langer apparently “didn’t understand what I was trying to say to her” (151).

<sup>25</sup> Many of these aphorisms, assembled by Pierre Reverdy, appear in 1917 in *Nord-Sud*.

<sup>26</sup> The missing sentence, which serves as an expansion upon the idea of “an effort of the mind” necessary to creation, reads: “In short, these two arts, poetry and painting, have in common a laborious element, which, when it is exercised, is not only a labor but a consummation as well” (165). The omission of this sentence in the translation does not fully obfuscate the communication of Stevens’s basic assertion about discipline and rigor, though. As with Stevens’s poems, the first published version of Stevens’s essay was consulted, though the citation here refers to the reprinting in *The Necessary Angel*.

## Chapter Three

### **Liminality and Caricature: The Contrapuntal Incorporation of Eliot's "Burnt Norton" and "East Coker" into *Orígenes***

The appearance of two important poems by Eliot in the pages of *Orígenes* produces a complex of concurrences and conflicts, sympathies and antipathies, between the poet and the cultural, philosophical and religious tenets of the journal.<sup>1</sup> As we will see, Eliot's work finds a sympathetic context in Cintio Vitier's poems and essays, as those texts testify to a similar coordination of literary and religious concerns. Nonetheless, the concepts that are operative in Rodríguez Feo's translations bear many points of contention with the translator's vision of what Eliot represents. These concepts, tacitly shared by the translator and his coeditor Lezama, facilitate alterations in both the conceptual thrust of Eliot's poems and in the image of the personal characteristics of the poet himself. An vision of Eliot as pessimistic, passive renouncer of the world around him, informed by a slanted notion of the mysticism that informs his work, controls the transfer of the poems into the context of *Orígenes*. Through this act of contrapuntal incorporation, Lezama and Rodríguez Feo assert their vision of *origenismo*. Most evidently, they assert the journal as an embodiment of Lezama's notions of malleable history and of the poetic celebration of the body. But also, they implicitly position *origenismo* within a set of cultural and sociological tendencies associated with their own notion of Catholic culture. They do so by way of their portrayal of Eliot as an embodiment of Anglo-American Protestantism and puritanism.

## The Facts of the Exchange

The first text related to Eliot to appear in *Orígenes* is F. O. Matthiessen's "The Quartets." The text is published, in Rodríguez Feo's translation, in 1944.<sup>2</sup> It is likely that Rodríguez Feo plans at this point to follow the essay with translations of all four poems. The essay's appearance inaugurates this project and prepares for the translations. The fact that Rodríguez Feo intends, from the beginning, to devote so much space in the magazine to Eliot's work clearly indicates great interest and respect. Further, in the first year of *Orígenes'* life, Rodríguez Feo is most likely thinking about quickly establishing the seriousness and ambition of the journal.

Opening the Eliot sequence with a fourteen page critical essay establishes a critical framework that will influence the interpretations of the poems by Spanish-speaking readers of *Orígenes*. The translation of Matthiessen's essay appears with a footnote, praising the author as "...one of the most rigorous critics his country possesses" and confessing that the publication of the essay "...constitutes a real pleasure for the editors of *Orígenes*" (3).<sup>3</sup> The reverent tone of the note authorizes Matthiessen as an authority in the interpretation of Eliot's work, working to establish a privileged role for the critical essay in shaping the domestic reception of the poems. Matthiessen's essay is not a particularly penetrating meditation on Eliot's philosophical and religious ideas, though it does contextualize the poems within the poet's broader work and elucidate their formal and musical structures well. As we will see in our analysis of Rodríguez Feo's translations of Eliot's poems, the Cuban editor effectively allows this detailed discussion of the poems' formal and musical characteristics to compensate for the absence of a sense of those structures in the translation. This compromise illustrates an important duality:

Rodríguez Feo wants readers to have a sense of the technical ambitions that were so important to Eliot, yet he does not attempt to recreate them in his translation. Thus, despite Rodríguez Feo's initial intentions, the translations themselves distort the coordination of musical and conceptual structures in the poem. This fact will become clear in the last section of this chapter.

In 1946, Rodríguez Feo sends a letter to T. S. Eliot in London, asking his permission to publish a translation of "East Coker" (Rodríguez Feo, *Correspondencia*, 17), which Eliot wrote in 1940 and which subsequently appeared in 1943 as the second of the *Four Quartets*. Upon receiving the request, Eliot probably remembers that in 1940, the first section of his poem "The Hollow Men" ("A penny for the Old Guy") was published in the bimonthly *Espuela de plata*, one of *Orígenes'* predecessors.<sup>4</sup> He consents, and the translation of "East Coker" appears in *Orígenes* in the spring of 1946.

In May of 1947, Rodríguez Feo meets Eliot for the first time, at Eliot's lecture on Milton at the Frick Museum in New York. Many luminaries of the literary world are in attendance to hear Eliot's remarks—W. H. Auden, E. E. Cummings, E. M. Forster, Archibald MacLeish, I. A. Richards, Stephen Spender and Allen Tate (Rodríguez Feo, *Correspondencia*, 54). Rodríguez Feo's admiration for Eliot's intellect is clear in his description of the event in a letter to Lezama: "Hoy tuve el raro privilegio de oír a T. S. Eliot en una brillante conferencia sobre el gran genio poético Milton" ("Today I had the rare privilege of hearing T. S. Eliot in a brilliant lecture on the great poetic genius Milton") (54). After the lecture, Rodríguez Feo is introduced to Eliot, and accompanies the poet and a group of his friends to the Plaza Hotel bar. There, the Cuban editor obtains Eliot's permission to translate "Burnt Norton." Though it is the second of the *Quartets* to

appear in *Orígenes*, it was the first of the four poems to be completed by Eliot, in 1935. It first appeared in *Collected Poems 1909-35*, and came to be the opening poem of the *Quartets*.

Eliot remarks to Rodríguez Feo that the job of translating the poem would require a “titanic” effort. In 1989, Rodríguez Feo remembers that the remark was delivered with what he calls Eliot’s “proverbial irony” (“...me pareció muy a tono con su proverbial ironía”) (17). There may have been “titanic” difficulties, for the poem does not appear for two years. Some of these difficulties probably stem from the translator’s souring personal feelings for the famous poet. The arrogance that lies behind Eliot’s irony is one impulse for the Cuban translator’s changing estimation.

Nonetheless, on this evening in New York, Rodríguez Feo is clearly very excited to have met a man of such great stature. He sends his colleague Lezama a note two days later, describing Eliot with a mixture of awe and scientific curiosity: “Es un hombre muy fino, de nariz alargada y recta, pelo medio canoso por los lados, ojos azules, y un acento semi-Cambridge. Usa unas gafas que recuerdan a Joyce. Lo presentaron como ‘el poeta más grande vivo de la lengua inglesa’ y el buen señor ni pestañeó” (“He is a very fine man, with a long, straight nose, hair a bit gray on the sides, blue eyes, and a semi-Cambridge accent. He wears glasses that remind one of Joyce. They presented him as ‘the greatest living poet of the English language,’ and the good sir did not even blink”) (Rodríguez Feo, *Correspondencia*, 54).

In the fall of 1948, Eliot arrives at Princeton to join the Institute for Advanced Studies. Rodríguez Feo began graduate studies in Spanish literature at Princeton in the fall of the previous year. On October 8, Rodríguez Feo exclaims, in a letter to Wallace

Stevens: “Eliot is around but so well disguised that I cannot detect him. I hope to see him soon. I am anxious to feel his pulse. Does it beat with the same ‘primaver’ gusto that shines through your adivinations [?]” (135). The young Cuban thrives on the opportunity to make personal contacts with writers and establish lively and extended dialogues with them, and we see in his comment to Stevens the nearly romantic admiration the young man is capable of feeling for an esteemed author. This sense of reverent intimacy is clearly enhanced by the labor of having translating Eliot’s poem, a “titanic” task of rigorous analysis that often becomes an act of identification with the author.

Nonetheless, this awe gradually turns to frustration and resentment, as Rodríguez Feo later learns how inaccessible Eliot can be. Though it is clear that he and Eliot exchange a few letters, Rodríguez Feo remarks to Lezama in a letter dated October 1948: “No he visto a Eliot aún. Ya está aquí. Le voy a escribir rogando audiencia. Veremos.” (“I have not seen Eliot yet. He’s here. I’m going to write him, and ask for an audience. We will see”) (100). Sarcasm creeps into his remarks; his diction implies that Eliot sees himself as a king or a pope. Soon, Rodríguez Feo decides on a disappointing answer to his own question about Eliot’s “gusto”: Eliot is an incurable snob, a repressed intellectual fearful of other people and his own emotions.

In November of 1948, Rodríguez Feo, unable to see the poet privately, takes advantage of a public occasion to inform him of his verdict. Emboldened by drunkenness, he vents his anger and disillusionment upon Eliot at a cocktail party, in a “...remark ... about his perverse academic attitude toward life. He would visit his own prep school but was not prepared to see anything or anyone that might disturb his Olympic serenity” (Secretaries 146). The regal or papal Eliot now becomes a disdainful



god, at a complete remove from ordinary human beings. One can only speculate how Eliot responds to the attack.

Rodríguez Feo, in the same letter to Stevens, elaborates a theory about Eliot's inner workings, asserting that the man is full of demonic passions that he meticulously represses: "...I suspect that the man is really a devil; he is possessed and has been kneeling in his night-shirt ever since he felt the sting of the dart ... Like all great men he must shorten, and oh how carefully, the leash lest his demon barks at the master" (146). What he sees as Eliot's repressed nature is part of a general pattern he perceives in the academic atmosphere of Princeton, which itself magnifies the Puritan component of U.S. culture. The "...expressions on the [Princeton] men of letters' snouts..." as French Catholic poet Pierre Emmanuel discusses suffering and Crucifixion, is another example, mentioned in the same letter, of an American cultural puritanism (Secretaries 147).

As of October, 1948, Rodríguez Feo is still working on the translation of "Burnt Norton" proposed over a year before. He informs Lezama that he is still waiting to hear from Eliot, which implies that he is waiting for the poet's approval of the translation before sending it off to Havana (Rodríguez Feo, Correspondencia, 100). Rodríguez Feo also anticipates publishing a translation of "The Dry Salvages" after completing "Burnt Norton" (Correspondencia 102). After feeling snubbed and subsequently making his confrontational remark at the party, Rodríguez Feo likely shelves "Burnt Norton" in disgust. In November, 1948, Eliot is informed that he has won the Nobel Prize for Literature, and leaves Princeton. He accepts the prize on December 10.

Rodríguez Feo's translation of "Burnt Norton" is finally printed in the summer, 1949 number. "The Dry Salvages" never appears, though Rodríguez Feo is working on a

translation of the poem as of November of 1948 (Correspondencia 104). In March of 1949, Lezama asks Rodríguez Feo what has become of his translation, joking: “¿Por qué esa pereza, lo mismo cuando estás en país frío o caliente?” (“Why such laziness, which is the same whether you are in cold or hot countries?”) (114). Rodríguez Feo never responds to Lezama’s affectionate prodding. And, though he most likely had plans at the outset to publish “Little Gidding,” the last of the *Quartets*, there is no evidence in his correspondence that he ever begins work on a translation.

Between his run-in with the poet and the appearance of the translation of “Burnt Norton,” there is evidence of Rodríguez Feo’s continued rancor. Upon hearing the Nobel announcement, Rodríguez Feo writes in a snarl to Lezama, “T. S. Eliot se ha embolsado \$44.000 y el honorífico Premio Nobel. En seguida se disparó ‘incógnito’ de Princeton, pues los sabuesos de la prensa andaban a su caza” (“T. S. Eliot has pocketed \$44,000 and the honorific Nobel Prize. Immediately, he shot off incognito from Princeton, as the bloodhounds of the press were hunting him down”) (102). Four months later, he asks Wallace Stevens, “Have you seen Mr. Eliot’s pretentious little essay on Kultur” (155), in reference to “Notes Towards a Definition of Culture,” which had appeared in 1943 in *The New English Weekly* and the next year in *Partisan Review*.<sup>5</sup> The essay promises an ambitious definition, but does not deliver, serving only to voice Eliot’s concerns about the disintegration of what he identifies as *his* culture—aristocratic, Christian and British. When he uses the term “Kultur,” it is clear that Rodríguez Feo sniffs out parallels to fascism in Eliot’s longing for a national culture rooted in a stable sense of history and localized on a particular sacred soil, in his reservations about allowing “achievement” to

determine who the society's elite are, and in his efforts at blurring the distinctions between religion and national identity.<sup>6</sup>

It is tempting to draw a causal connection between Rodríguez Feo's conclusions about Eliot's character and the distorting effects his translations have on Eliot's poems. Nonetheless, this theory does not stand the test of a historical view of the two men's exchanges. Though he translates "East Coker" at a time before his feelings about Eliot have soured, his textual incursions into that text betray the same negative presuppositions about Eliot's philosophical and religious ideas that are found in the translation of "Burnt Norton."

Thus, it appears that Rodríguez Feo's negative comments about Eliot's personality emerge from an underlying feeling about the poet's work that originates in an association with Lezama's notion of the "futurity" of poetic discourse (Lezama Lima and Rodríguez Feo, *Desintegración*, 61) and Rodríguez Feo's own operative concept of puritanism.<sup>7</sup> In relation to these conceptual contexts, Eliot himself and his work come to represent a poetics of skepticism and repression. As we will see, these *origenista* ideologies explain not only Rodríguez Feo's reactions to Eliot's behavior, but also elucidate the pressures exerted upon Eliot's poems in Rodríguez Feo's translations.

First, we will read each of Eliot's poems carefully, in order to appreciate the complexity of his poetic, philosophical and religious agendas. Then we will examine the consonances between Eliot's ideas and the ideas of Cintio Vitier. Subsequently, we will sketch out the conflict between Eliot's and Lezama's notions of time and poetic agency. Then, we will move to an interpretation of Rodríguez Feo's translations, in order to

illustrate the distortions and simplifications of these agendas that they enact, as they mobilize certain key concepts of *origenismo* that the translator shares with Lezama.

### **“Burnt Norton” and “East Coker”:** Concrete Experience, Liminality,

#### **Transcendence**

The fact that the poems “Burnt Norton” and “East Coker” are personal reflections is signaled by the titles, each one denominating a place of significance for the poet.

Knowing the importance of each place contributes to our understanding of each poem’s approach to the fundamental theme of time. Burnt Norton is an English estate where the poet had walked in 1935 with Emily Hale, the woman he realized he should have married instead of Vivienne Haigh-Wood, the wife from whom he was separated in 1933. Eliot found himself in a morass of regret, and the poem’s expression of longing for the union of the past and the present emerges in large part from a feeling of frustrated romantic love (Donoghue 2). “East Coker” is a village in Somerset, England, from which Eliot’s ancestors had immigrated to America. Eliot’s ashes were interred in the parish church there. The themes of cycles and ancestry are underscored by the title.

The two poems deal with the same constellation of philosophical problems, which revolve around the central issue of subjective experiences of temporality. Yet, each poem has a distinct emotional and experiential perspective on the issues. As its emotional impulse derives from a reflection on mis-steps and lost opportunities, “Burnt Norton” sinks more often into regret and despair in the face of linear time. “East Coker,” on the other hand, is inspired by a sense of continuity and repetition. This sense is derived from pondering ancestral linkages and the natural world’s cyclical movements.

“East Coker” therefore inflects the despairing vision found in “Burnt Norton” with notions of a redemptive temporality.

In both poems, human experience is mapped out in a space between two distinct, though intersecting dimensions. The first is the dimension of time-as-progression, which is associated with concrete experience, movement, change, limited agency, and restricted consciousness of the world. The second is the dimension of God’s time or eternity, which is associated with transcendence, stasis, constancy, power, and total consciousness. Human beings do not exclusively inhabit one or the other of these dimensions, but rather struggle endlessly with their intermediary position in relation to them. The poems are not “about” eternity or transcendence, just as they are not “about” progression or worldliness. Rather, the poems explicate and dramatize moments of relation between these opposites. As Jewel Spears Brooker asserts, Eliot “...focuses not on fragments or experiences or ideas, but rather on relations between them, on the gaps opened by intersection and difference. Thus, in the *Quartets*, a focus on betweenness, on what is absent or ‘not there,’ causes relation-in-itself to emerge as the most important presence of the sequence” (90). What the poems aspire toward is thus subtle; they work to gradually and systematically build up a pattern of interlocking conceptual relationships in the mind of the reader.

As a result of this emphasis on relation, it is important to recognize the general progression by which the *Quartets* move. Operating in each poem is a discourse that periodically undoes itself, erases what it has inscribed, and returns to originary points of development to reinitiate its movements. The poems systematically frustrate the readerly expectation of progressively accruing information or insight. Instead, they enunciate

their authority in such a way that prepares for inevitable disarticulations that occur at measured intervals throughout the poems. At these moments, the poems engage in a metapoetic reflection on the inefficacy of intellectual pursuits, the poetic discourse of the poems themselves, and communication in general. Eliot interrupts ambitious attempts at characterizing subtle spiritual and experiential states with deflating declarations of failure. Language's polysemy undermines its user's ambitions, and the very object of linguistic communication itself is so dynamic as to make even a perfected poetic language hopelessly inadequate.

In order to elaborate a language suited to the weighty task of evoking the dualities of human existence, and to explore the human longing to break free of the plane of worldliness and inhabit the plane of transcendence, Eliot draws from his deep and broad immersion in Western mysticisms—*The Cloud of Unknowing*, St. John of the Cross—and in the Eastern strains of religious and philosophical thought with which they are so compatible—the teachings of the Buddha, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Upanishads.<sup>8</sup> The poems echo many of the exhortations made in these varied texts. Desire is evoked as the source of suffering and as a state of enslavement to linear time. In response, the speaker re-enacts the teachings of mystic disciplines of humility, the mastery of bodily desires, and the aspiration toward a union with God. The physical and spiritual selves must enter a space of darkness, in which sense and belief are both erased and preparations are made for a new and transformative spiritual experience.

In teaching these traditions, “Burnt Norton” and “East Coker” also express an acceptance of the persistence of desire, of immersion in the fleeting moment, and of the aesthetic or sensory orientation to the world. This acceptance is not a departure from

Western or Eastern mysticisms, nor from fundamental Buddhist teachings. For these traditions, the enlightened one does not totally withdraw from concrete experience. Instead, after reaching a certain stage of spiritual vision, the enlightened one returns to time and the physical world and experiences them in a new way. After his enlightenment under the bodhi tree, the Buddha returns to the world to teach the “Middle Way” to his followers. The mystic in the tradition of St. John must also return. Rowan Williams argues that, for St. John, the mystic makes a transformed return to worldly life after his illumination. Only after the individual comes to feel the presence of God in the night of the soul, after he has had what Williams calls “...the sense of being drawn into a central magnetic area of obscurity,” (181) can his aesthetic sense subsequently be restored to him. As Williams explains, St. John asserts that the union with God is an experience that makes possible a certain kind of return to existence in the world: “...the state of union involves a re-conversion to creatures. If union is a ‘new light on things,’ it is a fresh sense of the world as God’s world, of the continuity as well as the discontinuity between created and uncreated beauty” (188).

The possibility of this return to creation is based upon the continued independence of the mystic’s identity, even after the moment of loving union with God. As we have seen, Colin Thompson explains that St. John’s mysticism must be seen as theistic, rather than monistic (11-12). The distinction between God the Beloved and the human lover persists, raising the question of how the mystic will continue to exist as a human being in the phenomenal world.

Eliot’s poems engage this question. Consonant with this understanding of the mystic’s life in the physical world, neither “Burnt Norton” nor “East Coker” announces a

permanent transition from a worldly to a spiritual mode of existence, but rather elaborates moments in which the transcendent expresses itself *through* a presence, and linear time makes a glimpse of eternity possible. It is important to recognize that Eliot's poems are not just a set of instructions in the mystic discipline, like St. John of the Cross's *Subida al Monte Carmelo*. Nor are they metaphorical evocations of the loving union with God, as found in the "Noche oscura." Eliot's evocation of the notion of a mystic union exists in a persistent and dynamic relationship to a series of opposing phenomena—sense perception, worldly desire, and change. The mystic does not reach a state of stasis when she is enlightened; instead she returns repeatedly to the created world and experiences a different encounter with it, because of her enlightenment.

Formally, the poems take on a musical shape. By calling the group of poems "quartets," Eliot signals a number of intentions. In a specific, technical sense, Eliot aims at the interweaving of different themes and an emphasis on the moments of transition between passages of great lyrical intensity and ones that are flatly prosaic.<sup>9</sup> These techniques of counterpoint and transition exteriorize the poems' conceptual focus on liminality, relation and intersection. Music is a mode of expression, like language, built on shared perceptions of relationships. Further, the musical text, like the poetic text, occupies a liminal space between its manifestation as stable and synchronic (as written text) and its manifestation as diachronic and changing (as performance). The true life of poetry and music is lived in the space between these two realities. The musical metaphor is thus an apt means for Eliot to emphasize his orientation toward dynamic relationships, rather than toward one or another conceptual entity.



### **“Burnt Norton”: Tentative Resolutions**

Denis Donoghue likens the opening of “Burnt Norton” to “a bewildered seminar” (4) that establishes a pessimistic stance toward human existence in time. It proceeds, heavily, discursively, and repetitively, with a discouraging assertion of the idea of determinism:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable. (1-5)

Contemplating the idea that the entirety of time is predetermined, static, and present in every moment, the individual feels a total loss of agency. A totalizing perspective on time is introduced into the human frame of experience, with the oppressive implication that human action in the present cannot alter a static pattern.

The personal impetus behind this meditation becomes clear upon further reading. The intellectual self that recognizes the inevitability of his situation in time cedes control to an emotional self that still wishes to go back in time and alter the course of events, if only imaginatively. Eliot himself, standing in a manorial garden with the woman he truly loves but never married, is recognizable in this transition from intellection to longing. The speaker moves from a statement of “unredeemable” temporality to a regretful musing on “what might have been” (6), a sphere of action that exists “...only in a world of speculation” (8). The speaker follows an imagined invitation to indulge in just this kind of rueful “speculation”:

Footfalls echo in the memory  
Down the passage which we did not take  
Towards the door we never opened  
Into the rose-garden. (11-14)

The speaker imaginatively returns to the past and enters a rose-garden, the point of access into an Edenic “first world” (24). There, the speaker is beckoned by invisible figures who lead him to a dry pool that miraculously “...filled with water out of sunlight/ And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly...” (27-8).

Here, we find a transition between two similar images—the rose and the lotus. The roses, signifying a romantic ideal unrealized, stand at an erotically charged distance intersected by the boundary of the door. Visible through the open door, the roses draw the speaker toward a vision of a lotus reaching upward toward the sun. In Hindu and Buddhist traditions, this image evokes the concepts of emerging life and emerging wisdom.<sup>10</sup> The relationship between the rose and the lotus is crucial, and it highlights a broader conceptual relationship that organizes much of the poem. Romantic desire and enlightenment are placed in a sympathetic relationship, the former leading the speaker to the threshold of the latter. Throughout the *Quartets*, the sensual and the spiritual interpenetrate, rather than arranging themselves in a binary opposition or as discrete stages in a progression toward enlightenment.

In the vision of the lotus, the speaker achieves a pure state of mind and spirit that allows for a glimpse of transcendent reality. Yet, the moment of illumination is brief. The speaker is called away from the scene of his vision by a bird, who reveals to him that “...human kind/ Cannot bear very much reality” (44-5). This statement returns to the

theme of the poem's opening—the unity of time in a pattern that transcends progression. This is precisely the reality human beings “cannot bear”: the reality of God's time, of a prevailing order that renders their sense of agency illusory. Desire's impulse toward action is forestalled by this sense of time.

The verse that opens the second section creates a jarring transition from the prosaic closing of the first. The lines, after some rhythmic irregularity at the outset, settle into iambic tetrameter, with an irregular rhyme scheme. If the looser verse of the first section evoked the action of wandering through an imagined space, the more structured verse that opens the second section evokes the way movements resolve themselves into broader patterns:

The dance along the artery  
The circulation of the lymph  
Are figured in the drift of stars  
Ascend to summer in the tree  
We move above the moving tree  
In light upon the figured leaf  
And hear upon the sodden floor  
Below, the boarhound and the boar  
Pursue their pattern as before  
But reconciled among the stars. (52-61)

These images evoke movements that order themselves into worldly and celestial patterns. The most resonant term in the passage is “reconciled,” suggesting the delicate relationship between opposing forces, in this case, of movement and stasis.

The tightly structured lyricism of this opening breaks off, and a wholly different kind of discourse picks up the same thematic thread. This discourse expands on the concept of the reconciliation, through the paradigmatic image of the dance. The discourse is one of religious instruction, employing the rhetorical tradition of the *via negativa*; the speaker proposes two opposite ways of characterizing the concept of the reconciliation, negating each one in turn:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline... (62-6)

The dance described is both spatial and temporal. It is the reconciliation both of change and constancy in the physical world, and of the past and the future in the present moment. In order to draw the reader toward a meditation on this complex spatial-temporal duality, Eliot employs a discourse of philosophical and spiritual instruction designed to challenge the listener to supercede limiting conceptions of metaphysical realities. It is a discourse that removes familiar points of reference (“Neither movement from not towards”) and rejects binaries (“Neither flesh nor fleshless”) in order to intimate a third space and to argue for the recognition of a new set of reference points.

In continuing this process of evoking a third space of subtle reconciliation, Eliot evokes both Eastern and Western mystic disciplines of transcending worldly desires in pursuit of enlightenment, though he pointedly modifies the propositions of those disciplines in order to declare the possibility of a synthesis of aesthetics and spirituality:

The inner freedom from the practical desire,  
The release from action and suffering, release from the inner  
And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded  
By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving,  
*Erhebung* without motion, concentration  
Without elimination... (70-5)

These acts of purifying the soul by eliminating desire, willfulness, and narrow thinking are balanced by a crucial opposite—"a grace of sense." This opposite ushers in the restoration and enlightenment of sensibility rather than its total eradication. The concept of the "grace of sense" is itself a reconciliation, in its suggestion of both God's grace and a human grace, each of which is associated with an aesthetic sense.

What is suggested here is a kind of transcendent sensibility, evoked by the image of "white light." The fact that this light "surrounds" the abnegative activities of the mystic or meditator suggests that it transforms those activities and preserves sensibility as a fundamental category for them. Thus, the speaker characterizes this reconciliation between spiritual and aesthetic senses as an elevation (*Erhebung*) without motion, a spiritual infusion into the workings of the aesthetic sense without removing it from its sphere of activity in the sensible world. Further, the roaming of sense is redirected toward a metaphysical center ("[c]oncentration") without sacrificing its multiplicity ("[w]ithout elimination"). The result of these syntheses is a tempering of the extremism inherent in spiritual disciplines of abnegation, such that sensory experience is not fully rejected in the search for enlightenment.

The preservation of the aesthetic is essentially a spatial phenomenon, concerned with the relationship between the sensory apparatus of the human body with its physical surroundings. This spatial phenomenon is connected, as we have asserted before, to a temporal counterpart, an evocation of which closes the second section of “Burnt Norton.” The closing states what many spiritual disciplines assert—that only a transcendence of time-as-progression allows us to glimpse the static totality of time: “Time past and time future/ Allow but a little consciousness./ To be conscious is not to be in time” (83-4). Subjection to linear time is seen as a profound impediment to a more total consciousness. The speaker, following the rhetorical pattern we have seen above, calls forth this problematic in order to revise it, proposing the union of opposites:

But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,  
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,  
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall  
Be remembered; involved with past and future.  
Only through time time is conquered. (86-90)

The speaker proposes memory as a reconciliation between time and eternity. The moment of remembrance is dependent upon progression, yet enacts a temporal unity. Only one immersed in the flow of time-as-progression can subsequently experience the moment of synchronicity, when the past is relived.

In the third section, the speaker assumes a darker and less gentle tone. Suggestions of luminous intersections of worldliness and transcendence, of time and memory, give way to the vivid depiction of a scene of human mediocrity and ignorance. This scene is characteristic of the spiritually vacant modernity often encountered in

Eliot's work. "Men and bits of paper" blow through the scene, "...whirled by the cold wind" (104) that blows through "...London,/ Hampstead and Clerkenwell, Campden and Putney,/Highgate, Primrose and Ludgate" (110-12). The speaker continues the technique of the *via negativa* employed previously in the poem, though he inverts its function. He asserts that the modern person occupies a space of "dim light" (92) between the radiance of aesthetic sense and the darkness of spiritual purity: "...neither daylight/ Investing form with lucid stillness.../ Nor darkness to purify the soul.../ Neither plenitude nor vacancy..." (92-9).

The speaker's description of this particular intellectual and spiritual problem facilitates a return to mystic discourse, making clear what obstacles are to be overcome in pursuit of enlightenment. Mysticism is implicitly posed as a cure for the ills of modernity. At this moment of distinct transition, the speaker alters his mode of address, enunciating commands to the "torpid" (109) modern persons he describes:

Descend lower, descend only  
Into the world of perpetual solitude,  
World not world, but that which is not world,  
Internal darkness, deprivation  
And destitution of all property,  
Desiccation of the world of sense,  
Evacuation of the world of fancy  
Inoperancy of the world of spirit (114-21)

The heavy, repeated "d" sounds thud with the weight of a forceful pronouncement: one who is dissolute, distracted, and able to appreciate neither beauty nor piety, must begin

by following, step by excruciating step, the mystic regimen of mortification. At this stage, there is no room for “grace of sense.”

The discrete stages of abnegation the speaker of Eliot’s poem describes follow precisely the stages of spiritual progress St. John of the Cross describes in *Subida al Monte Carmelo*. At the earliest stage, the night of the senses, the practitioner rejects the objects of his bodily appetites, along with false goals of worldly success (Book 1 Chapter 4). Similarly, Eliot’s speaker calls for “destitution” and “desiccation of ... sense.” At the second stage in St. John’s progression, the practitioner enters into a night of the spirit, where he loses not only his physical comforts, but also his image of God and even his faith itself. Because they are imperfect, this image and this faith are also obliterated, so that the practitioner can feel the absence of God, thereby experiencing the sense of total abandonment felt by Christ on the Cross (2.7). Appropriately, the speaker of “Burnt Norton” calls for the “[i]noperancy of the world of spirit.” It is in this state of total loss that the soul is prepared for the third night of the soul, the moment of union with God. The speaker closes the third section of the poem by asserting that the individual who practices this discipline will arrive at a state of stillness that is, by implication, an escape from linear time. This implication arises from the contrast between the mystic practitioner and the modern world, which “...moves/ In appetency, on its metallated ways/ Of time past and time future” (124-6).

Thus, the speaker asserts the need for the modern subject to arrive at a state of total stillness outside of time. As we have seen above, the speaker declares the possibility of living in an awareness of the interpenetrations of stillness and movement, progression and eternity. This moment in the discourse is more extreme. Yet, the



reconciliation of the worldly and the spiritual is only possible after the distractions of modern life are thoroughly discarded and the individual experiences the mystic darkness. Only then can there be a return, wherein the physical world is seen again, but through the eyes of one enlightened by a spiritual discipline.

The fourth section of the poem calls forth the possibility, in an interrogative mode, of just this moment of restoration of sense after the movement into darkness. This restoration perhaps can occur within a new sphere of existence that has been cleansed and enlightened by the mystic experience. The speaker makes a brief, tentative description of the moment of transcendence through a contemplation of the natural world.

Appropriately, this moment comes at dusk, the intermediary point between the light of the visual sense and the darkness of the spiritual sense. The speaker asks if, at this moment, nature will become animated, and reach toward us for a moment of contact:

Will the sunflower turn to us, will the clematis

Stray down, bend to us; tendril and spray

Clutch and cling?

Chill

Fingers of yew be curled

Down on us? ... (129-34)

The speaker suggests that the sunflower might turn to the enlightened viewer of the scene because the light of divine wisdom makes her metaphorically like the sun. Yet the clematis and the branches of the yew approach the viewers with a threatening desperation, and it is unclear if the embrace suggested between plant and human is affectionate or violent. Though an enlightened engagement with the physical world is

posited, nature still possesses a vaguely threatening quality. This ambiguity recalls the moment, in St. John's "La noche oscura," when God's "serene hand" "wound[s]" the neck of the mystic lover. The elusiveness of Eliot's imagery resonates with the deictic function of St. John's contradiction, pointing to a spiritual reality beyond words. The surface of the language bristles with this discursive tension.

This tension finds an oblique, yet sublime suggestion of a resolution, in an image of light, movement and stillness: "...After the kingfisher's wing/ Has answered light to light, and is silent, the light is still/ At the still point of the turning world" (134-6). The flight of the kingfisher recapitulates the dance of section two: a movement resolved into stillness. The wing of the bird is invested with a peculiar agency. It does not simply reflect light, but answers it. Further, its response is what implicitly allows the moment of stillness to take place. Thus, the physical entity is invested with a similar level of importance as the image of sunlight, with its symbolism of truth and life-origins. Again, the movement of signification reconciles opposites; motion enables stillness, and the visible frames an awareness of the metaphysical.

The final section of the poem contains an ambivalence of tone and argument that comes to shade the poem as a whole. The speaker is uncertain about the power of words to precisely communicate essences:

...Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still. (149-53)

This lament raises a problem that exemplifies the philosophical paradoxes the speaker engages throughout the poem. Words, though they are implored to stay still, are in a constant dance of signification. This frustration with polysemy is driven by the clarity of the speaker's vision, and by the urgency of his efforts to communicate that vision to the listener. Though the speaker has enacted delicate reconciliations of just these kinds of tensions—as in the workings of the “grace of sense,” the dance, and the kingfisher's wing—he is not sure what to make of a similar tension within the verbal medium he has attempted to use to communicate those reconciliations.

Careful readers might find the answer to the speaker's concerns earlier in the section: “...Only by the form, the pattern,/ Can words or music reach/ The stillness...” (140-2). This statement is a direct assertion of the importance of the poet's art. The formal coherence of the text is the means by which the play of signification is controlled. Repetitions, metrical patterns, and structural affinities to music all act to organize the instabilities of meaning into larger coherences. Yet, this beautiful statement is followed by the uncertainty seen above, reminding us of the poem's darker, unsettled tonal undercurrent that flows from an emotional core of regret and frustration.

The duality of careful reconciliation of opposites and despairing acknowledgments of chaos closes the poem. The speaker posits love as a fruitful intermediary between the extremes of desire and disinterest, movement and stillness:

Desire itself is movement

Not in itself desirable;

Love is itself unmoving,

Only the cause and end of movement... (161-4)

The evocation of love—as human desire infused with aspirations toward the divine—would be a consummate note on which to close the poem. It would present the highest of the forms of metaphysical synthesis the poem suggests.

But, nonetheless, the speaker breaks off his discourse on a profoundly ambivalent note. The sound of children playing emerges, synaesthetized in the image of a shaft of sunlight, and embodying the duality of the fleeting moment and the glimpse of a richly patterned transcendent reality. In response, the speaker implores the reader to look quickly before missing this intimation of the eternal: “Quick now, here, now, always” (173). His haste is driven by a knowledge of the impermanence of any human contact with the divine; he urges us to look carefully, for what is “always here” is not always visible. Though the “children in the foliage” (172) rehearse the dance that reconciles time with eternity, the speaker cannot simply appreciate the beauty of the moment. The aforementioned emotional core of the poem draws his mind back to despair, as he exclaims, “Ridiculous the waste sad time/ Stretching before and after” (174-5). Whereas the poem suggests ways in which an existence in the flow of time can still produce insights into totalities, its ending is drawn back to the experience of a man who feels he has wasted years of his life and cannot recuperate them.

### **“East Coker”: Abnegation and Redemption**

“East Coker” follows the same formal template as “Burnt Norton,” with an equal number of sections and similar transitions of theme and tone. Like the earlier poem, it opens with a meditation on time from a broad point of view that highlights the static patterns that order the flux of progression. In a further parallel with “Burnt Norton,” its

breadth of perspective opens outward from a center in individual subjective experience. The speaker muses on the persistent cycles time organizes itself into, yet sees those cycles through the lens of his own life: “In my beginning is my end” (1).

Yet there is a difference of tone that is perceptible at the outset. Whereas “Burnt Norton” betrays a feeling of regret in the face of time, the opening of “East Coker” takes a less emotionally charged view of time, evoking a sense of resignation:

Houses live and die: there is a time for building  
And a time for living and for generation  
And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane  
And to shake the wainscot where the field-mouse trots  
And to shake the tattered arras woven with a silent motto. (9-13)

This passage is clearly inspired by Ecclesiastes 4, where the author Qoheleth resigns himself to the will of the Almighty when he asserts that “There is an appointed time for everything ... whatever God does will endure forever; there is no adding to it, or taking from it” (3:1; 3:14). Thus, the reader is led to acknowledge that he is not the force behind his own actions, and that he is simply playing out a script that has already been written.

Qoheleth goes on to express this idea of cosmic determinism in temporal terms, in a verse that haunts the whole of “East Coker”: “What now is has already been; what is to be, already is; and God restores what would otherwise be displaced” (3:15). Eliot restates and explores Qoheleth’s concept of a temporal determinism within which “God restores.” Inspired by this crucial notion of redemption, “East Coker” presents numerous instances of resurrection after death or destruction—“new building[s]” and “new fires.”

Thus, the attitude of the speaker toward the fact of cosmic determinism is not negative. The opening is calibrated to express a reconciliation between the speaker and the inevitability of his human fate. This reconciliation has brought peace. The idea of heaven underlies this reconciliation; the speaker is willing to see the cycles of death and rebirth without lamenting them because he sees in the progress of his own life the inevitability of his own resurrection after death. Thus, the speaker repeats the assertion: “In my beginning is my end” (1, 14). Resurrection is a possibility that hovers above the speaker’s musings on time and death.

After repeating his statement of faith, the speaker follows the pattern established in “Burnt Norton,” making a transition to the narration of a vision of transcendence. In the preceding poem, this section is narrated in first person plural, whereas in “East Coker,” the speaker narrates it in the second person, drawing the reader even closer to the scene of the vision:

Now the light falls

Across the open field, leaving the deep lane  
Shuttered with branches, dark in the afternoon,  
Where you lean against a bank while a van passes,  
And the deep lane insists on the direction  
Into the village... (14-19)

Like the moment at dusk at which the vision of “Burnt Norton,” section 4, takes place, the afternoon is drawn in vivid contrasts of light and shadow. These contrasts of light and darkness evoke the duality of the visible and the invisible, which itself suggests the

interaction of the worldly and the spiritual. The reader is reminded of the central relationship between sensory light and spiritual darkness.

The speaker continues to address the reader, informing him of the possibility of the vision of a past reanimated in the present:

In that open field,

If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close,

On a summer midnight, you can hear the music

Of the weak pipe and the little drum

And see them dancing around the bonfire

The association of man and woman (23-8)

Whereas the opening of the poem describes cyclical movements of time, the vision in the field is of the momentary intersection of past and present. In keeping with a general tendency of the poem, this temporal vision is personal. The lines that describe the dancing “of man and woman” are pieced together from *The Boke Named the Governour* (1530) by Sir Thomas Elyot (1490?-1546), an ancestor of the poet. Eliot’s rendering reads:

In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie—

A dignified and commodious sacrament.

Two and two, necessarye coniunction,

Holding eche other by the hand or arm

Whiche betokeneth concorde... (29-33)

Elyot’s text is a discourse on the propriety of certain social activities. Its condoning of dancing and its clearly sexual suggestions as a “sacrament[al]” symbol of matrimony

strikes a compromise between the order demanded by a higher authority and the disordering movements of the body. This reconciliation of the political and the corporal forms an interesting example of the kind of relationship between conceptual poles that forms the thematic backbone of the poem. Just as it arises from a particular relationship between past and present, the vision is in itself expressive of a particular relationship between order and chaos. In this way, the image of “daunsinge” parallels the more discursive development of the idea of the dance in both “East Coker” and “Burnt Norton.”

Further, Eliot quotes directly from the text, preserving its sixteenth-century spellings in order to establish the presence of the past in the very substance of poetic discourse. This presence is a joyful one, in which humans and animals celebrate their own and the earth’s fecundity. Furthermore, on a personal level, Eliot preserves those spellings to establish an intimacy with his ancestor, and thus place himself in a temporal frame in which his predecessors are present in his own act of enunciation. This is indeed a self-empowering gesture on the part of the poet, declaring not only the momentary transcendence of linear time, but also an enriching polyvocality of poetic expression endorsed by the continuity of ancestry. This joy contrasts starkly with the depressed ruminations on poetic failures in “Burnt Norton.”

In the second section, Eliot follows the pattern of “Burnt Norton” and employs an iambic tetrameter that settles into a lilting regularity, marked by rhyming couplets and a rhyming tercet. Similar to its precedent, this patterned verse enacts a tone of instruction that illustrates cosmic orders. In this case, though, the speaker does not build up an impression of interlocked patterns or “reconciliations,” but rather points to a system of



“disturbance[s]” (52). A warm spell in November, the eruption of thunder, “constellated wars” (60) between gods, and the seemingly conflictual movements of stars and constellations all resolve themselves into a broader pattern of cataclysms:

Comets weep and Leonids fly  
Hunt the heavens and the plains  
Whirled in a vortex that shall bring  
The world to that destructive fire  
Which burns before the ice-cap reigns. (63-7)

Though a darker tone is introduced in these dramatizations, the disaster alluded to is seen from a great distance. The speaker offers the reader a God-like vision of change in the universe that simulates the experience of total knowledge and thus total disinterest.

Despite the considerable skill with which this totalizing effect is achieved, a metapoetic discourse intrudes into the verse, shaking the reader’s sense of the speaker’s mastery and interrupting the metrical verse that evidences it. As in “Burnt Norton,” this voice laments the difficulties of the very poetic communication attempted in the poem. Referring to the iambic verses immediately preceding, the speaker sighs:

That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory:  
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,  
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle  
With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter  
It was not (to start again) what one had expected. (68-72)

In contrast to the apparent confidence with which the speaker confronts the juggernaut of Time, he takes a dim view here of his own attempts to communicate his hard-won

insights into metaphysical questions. The assertion that “[t]he poetry does not matter,” made in the course of a considerably ambitious poetic endeavor, is a monumental act of self-deflation. Noting that, in his descent into pessimism, he is “start[ing]” again,” the speaker highlights a negative cyclicity that shadows the redemptive cycles of the poem.

This moment of frustration does not immediately resolve into any kind of uplifting insight. Instead, it ushers in, without so much as a pause, an even darker meditation on the value of striving for wisdom through experience. The speaker wonders why many thoughtful people place so much stock in the wisdom to be gained in old age. The speaker muses that this wisdom is nothing but “the knowledge of dead secrets” (79). The wisdom is “dead” because it “...imposes a pattern, and falsifies,/ For the pattern is new in every moment” (84-5). In tension with previous evocations of the stability to be found in chaos, the speaker at this moment asserts the primacy of flux in the universe. Intellectual attempts at resolving experience into higher orders are rendered perpetually obsolete by persistent change. Human intellectual projects thus are doomed to failure; growth, learning, and progress are negated, and there can be no secure transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next. These implications are of no small significance to the poet who so carefully illustrates them, dedicated as he has been throughout his career to the project of defining the role of tradition in cultural pursuits.

The speaker comes to identify the illusion of wisdom with hubris, declaring that “The only wisdom we can hope to acquire/ Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless” (97-8). As Edward Lobb notes, humility can be endless because it opens a space for the infinity of God’s grace: “In theological terms, the recognition of our

powerlessness enables us to accept grace and transcend our limitations..." (26). But the speaker of "East Coker" asserts that before grace come crucial stages of abnegation.

Thus, the assertion of the importance of humility prepares the way for the opening of section three, an eloquent play on the classical *ubi sunt* motif:

O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,  
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant,  
The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters,  
The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers,  
Distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees,  
Industrial lords and petty contractors, all go into the dark... (101-6)

The negation of wisdom in section two leads here to a negation of the importance of achievement and distinction, in the face of human mortality. The great leveler, death erases distinctions so profoundly that it seems to eradicate, not just the distinction between the "lord" and the "contractor," but even personhood itself: "...we all go with them, into the silent funeral,/ Nobody's funeral, for there is no one to bury" (110-11).

This meditation on death is an action of disciplined preparation for the experience of mystical union. The speaker shifts rhetorically to a kind of confessional mode, in which he reveals his soul's aspiration toward "the darkness of God" (113). This darkness is to "come upon" him (112), implying an attitude of resignation and passivity on the part of the speaker. The speaker abdicates the hubris, striving and ambition he critiques earlier.

The speaker goes on to describe two successive stages in the process of emptying the self in preparation for the mystical experience. The first stage is a sensory

displacement, likened to the changing of scenery in a dark theater between acts of a play, when "...we know that the hills and the trees, the distant panorama/ And the bold imposing façade are all being rolled away..." (116-17). In this moment, the audience member realizes the illusory nature of what he sees, and is drawn into an embrace of sensory darkness.

The second stage is intellectual:

...when an underground train, in the tube, stops too long between stations

And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence

And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen

Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about... (118-21)

When the rhythm of the quotidian is interrupted, a constructive discomfort arises, wherein the practical exigencies of life (like arriving at one's destination on time, or at all) are cleared aside and the passenger is forced by his circumstances to enter a contemplative state. The passenger realizes how much of his thinking is tyrannized by exigency, and feels terrified by the emptying of his consciousness, leaving a void that is to be filled by the contemplation of God.

In a marked transition, the speaker shifts to a confessional mode, describing his own attempts at the mystic discipline. What follows is a recapitulation and further development of the exhortations to "[d]escend lower" that end section three of "Burnt Norton." Here, the speaker relates a dialogue in which he instructs his own soul to "...be still, and wait without hope/ For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love/ For love would be love of the wrong thing..." (123-25). The project of abnegation is proposed again, in a rhetoric that continues the instructional tone found at different

points in the poem: “Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought” (127). The speaker asserts that once worldly “hope,” “love” and “thought” are abandoned, enlightenment is possible. This mode of instruction is categorical and totalizing; it preaches total disengagement.

This total darkness is sought because, at the moment of God’s presence, it becomes light: “So the darkness shall be the light...” (128). In a similar inversion, the total abnegation of desire, which produces a physical, mental, emotional and spiritual stillness, facilitates an enlightened and joyful movement, allying “stillness” with “dancing” (128). The dance, now clearly a central motif in both poems, is obviously consonant with their musical form. But further, it is established in “Burnt Norton” as a reconciliation of chaos and stasis, and in section one of “East Coker” as a celebration of the living body. The image of the dance in section three of “East Coker” brings these two meanings together. Through its duality of stillness and movement, dancing here embodies an exquisite interrelation between abnegation and desire, and between the body and the spirit. Though, like the “light” of the same line, the image of the dance seems to replace a spiritually imperfect state with a perfect one, it is still marked by intratextual associations with the dynamic and the corporal.

This ambiguity, which encapsulates the conceptual content of the *Four Quartets* as a whole, is dramatized and elaborated in the highly aestheticized images that follow. As we will see, the images represent a temporary departure from the speaker’s avowal of the mystic discipline, though this departure ends up validating that discipline:

Whisper of running streams, and winter lightning.

The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry,

The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy  
Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony  
Of death and birth. (129-33)

Here, the speaker returns to a scene like the rose garden of “Burnt Norton.” The “laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy” takes up the drama that instigates “Burnt Norton”: a romantic/erotic desire thwarted long ago, yet not quite “lost,” as it is relived by the speaker in the present. The natural environment around him speaks of elusiveness, full as it is of “whisper[s],” the fleeting illuminations of “winter lightning,” and what is “unseen.” Yet, like the echo, these natural elements are still present. Though the “echoed ecstasy” hints at a moment of synchronicity, its basic function is indication. A recognition of “the agony/ Of death and birth,” of the suffering of an existence in time is the insight that the reliving of a lost desire facilitates.

The desolation that this insight into “agony” produces leads back to a statement of the mystical project. The moment among the thyme and the strawberries is contained within this larger mystic discourse, and serves a subservient function. Its role is to strengthen the argument for disciplined desolation by illustrating the impermanence of moments of aesthetic ecstasy. The pain of life-in-time is inevitable, even though there might be glimpses of beauty, so one must engage in a process whereby that pain can be superceded.

Thus, the speaker returns to a scene of mystical instruction, warning the reader that he will repeat himself (133-35). Not only does he do so, but he also repeats the words of St. John of the Cross, in what amounts to a near-translation of the Spanish mystic’s introductory verses to *Subida al Monte Carmelo*.<sup>11</sup> The speaker intones:

In order to arrive at what you do not know

You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.

In order to possess what you do not possess

You must go by the way of dispossession,

In order to arrive at what you are not

You must go through the way in which you are not. (138-43)

Eliot echoes St. John's use of negation and paradox to stimulate the mind to challenge its limits. As we have seen before, the speaker describes the mystical process confessionally, but what stands out here, and is more dominant throughout the poem, is an instructional mode of address.

At section four, Eliot executes another of the contrasting transitions that are central to his technique. Like section four of "Burnt Norton," there is a shift to a shorter, eight syllable line. In this case, the line is more uniformly iambic. Musically, the entire section is graceless and droning, characteristics that are consonant with its preachy, aphoristic tone. These qualities contrast with the delicate lyricism of the equivalent section in "Burnt Norton."

The speaker lectures his audience on the inevitability of death, asserting that its arrival is to be welcomed, because such is the only release from the "sickness" of our worldly existence. He employs the paradox again, in order to challenge the audience to alter its view on the nature of life:

Our only health is the disease

If we obey the dying nurse

Whose constant care is not to please

But to remind of our, and Adam's curse,

And that, to be restored, our sickness must grow worse. (152-56)

The role of the “dying nurse” and that of the speaker are the same: not to “please” us but to make us look at death head-on and to accept it as our only portal of access to eternity. The speaker explicitly builds a message that leads the mind of the audience toward the idea of resurrection in the assertion: “If to be warmed, then I must freeze/ And quake in frigid purgatorial fires” (164-65), and in a meditation on the meaning of Good Friday (167-71). The section nonetheless maintains a dark and admonishing tone throughout, as the moment of resurrection, whether of the soul waiting in Purgatory for the Judgment, or of Christ crucified, is left implicit.

Section five announces itself as a conclusion, and establishes a more expansively reflective feeling, in marked contrast to the didactic severity of its preceding section. The speaker makes a transition from the instructional back to the confessional mode. The lines are longer and unrhymed, though not precisely prosaic. Instead, they manage a balance between the conversational and the exalted. This is clearly a passage of what Eliot himself would call a “greater intensity” (Music 24-25), a fact thrown into relief by this punctuated transition.

The speaker and the poet are clearly one and the same in section five, a fact made clear by the reference to the moment of the poem's production. In the closing section, central themes are re-engaged and viewed from a perspective enriched by the poetic experiences that have accrued during the course of two poems:

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years—

Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l'entre deux guerres*—



Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt  
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure  
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words  
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which  
One is no longer disposed to say it... (172-78)

The poet returns to the metapoetic reflexivity found in section five of “Burnt Norton” and in section two of “East Coker.” The sense of dissatisfaction returns, and is united with the earlier reflection that “...knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies...” (“East Coker” 84). Yet, the speaker does not assert a total failure. Indeed, he acknowledges that he has at times “[gotten] the better of words.” The central problem is change; the assertions the speaker would wish to make through poetic language are as fluctuating as his experience of a chaotic world. The acceptance of this fact does not lead to a sense of total despair. Instead, the speaker’s dark meditations are enveloped in a qualified and modest optimism: “And so each venture/ Is a new beginning...” (178-79).

This delicate duality of pessimism and hope runs parallel to another paradoxical experience evoked in section five. The poet, in his struggle to articulate transcendent truths, is daunted by “shabby equipment always deteriorating/ ... the general mess of imprecision of feeling,/ Undisciplined squads of emotion” (180-82). Even when he succeeds, he realizes that what he has found “...has already been discovered/ Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope/ To emulate...” (183-85). Again, as in section two of the same poem, the notion of intellectual progress is negated, replaced by a model of cyclical losses and recoveries of knowledge. Yet, the focus of the speaker’s argument shifts from goal to process: “But perhaps neither gain nor loss./ For

us, there is only the trying..." (188-89). The speaker avows an ethic that valorizes effort and intention over accomplishment, a move that attenuates what might sound to some readers like an overall tone of abject despair.

The poem closes with a restatement of the idea of stillness and movement reconciled. Here, stillness suggests a firmness of spiritual purpose, an unwavering commitment to the project of enlightenment. Movement is, of course, part of this stillness; it is the constant striving for union with the divine that is the substance of this commitment:

We must be still and still moving

Into another intensity

For a further union, a deeper communion

Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,

The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters

Of the petrel and the porpoise.      In my end is my beginning. (204-09)

The union, though it may occur at privileged moments, is never perfect nor permanent. The speaker thus asserts the need to perpetually seek "a further union, a deeper communion."

The darkness of despair is central to this passage poetically, elaborated with the musical repetitions of "wave cry" and "wind cry" and the concrete images of "the petrel and the porpoise." This is so because darkness is central to the poem as a whole. But it is important to note that this zone of "desolation" is a space to be moved *through*. This distinction in the closing of the poem forces a re-evaluation of the gloomier moments in "East Coker," as well as in the *Quartets* in general. The essence of the poem's darkness

is redemptive, because it is understood, through a mystic perspective, to be a zone of transit toward enlightenment. The poem's final declaration underlines this essential optimism. After a pause of thought, manifested in a tab space in the final line, the speaker gathers together the poem's disparate threads of cyclicity and duality, layered with intellectual and spiritual confidence: "In my end is my beginning."

### **"East Coker" and "Burnt Norton" in the Context of *Orígenes***

Having developed a working understanding of the thematics and the mechanics of Eliot's poems, it is possible now to begin the process of contextualizing them within *Orígenes* by elucidating some of the consonances and dissonances they produce when they interact with different aspects of the Cuban journal's aesthetics and ethos. At this stage, we will leave translation aside as a factor in these interactions, in order to sketch the broader outlines of this intertextual interaction. Subsequently, we can examine the specific means by which the translation betrays Rodríguez Feo's particular take on this interaction. As we will see, he will function as both the medium and the mediator, simultaneously transferring the poem from one contextual sphere to another and interpreting the implications of that transfer. Both of these functions leave concrete textual traces in the translations.

Looking at the two poems from a distant perspective, it is obvious how they are incorporable into the philosophical discourses coordinated within *Orígenes*. The journal explicitly states an interest in tackling the same fundamental issues taken up in the *Quartets*. Eliot's poems are ambitious statements of the problematics of human existence in relation to the physical and metaphysical spheres. In this sense, they work in

conjunction with the journal's humanistic and religious agendas. *Orígenes* favors meditative work that interrogates the breadth of human experience. The journal asserts that art of all kinds should present an image of experiences of great intensity, wherein "...man shows his tension, his fever, his most guarded and valuable moments..." ("...el hombre muestra su tensión, su fiebre, sus momentos más vigilados y valiosos...") (Lezama and Rodríguez Feo, 1944, 5). In Eliot's poems, meditations on the nature of time, love and transcendence in relation to feelings of frustrated romance or of empowering connectedness to ancestors seem to respond directly to Lezama and Rodríguez Feo's injunction. This consonance is perceptible, even if Eliot's poems do not reach the degree of intense intimacy Lezama and Rodríguez Feo's statement demands.

It is important to note as well that both Eliot's poems and the dominant *origenista* aesthetic clear an important space for concrete sense experience in relation to intellectual, emotional and spiritual experience. In their opening statement in the journal, Lezama and Rodríguez Feo assert that art should elucidate the dynamic relationship between the interiority of the individual and the physical world that surrounds him, underlining "...his desires or ... his frustration arising from his darkest self, from his reaction or action before the solicitations of the exterior world" ("...sus deseos o ... su frustación [sic], ya partiendo de su yo más oscuro, de su reacción o acción ante las solicitaciones del mundo exterior...") (5). The bird that leads the speaker of "Burnt Norton" toward a vision of transcendence and wisdom, and the "deep lane" that "insists" that the speaker of "East Coker" follow a path toward a vision of the fusion of past and present, both represent just this kind of external solicitation that directs itself to the "darkest self."

The poems also work as an extension of the *origenistas*' reaction against the *vanguardia*, as they are, within their own context, post-avant-garde texts. The *Quartets* mark a clear departure from *The Waste Land* (1922), leaving behind the emphasis on fragmentation and formal innovation. The philosophical discursivity and the formal focus on transitions and interrelations in the later poems mark a clear and deliberate contrast with their precedent.<sup>12</sup> Of course, *Orígenes*, nearly contemporaneous with the *Quartets*, reacts against a different avant-garde precedent, as we have noted in the first chapter of this work. Yet, the presence of "East Coker" and "Burnt Norton" in the journal can be viewed as a gesture of self definition in opposition to a formally experimental and less overtly philosophical literary precedent in Cuba.

Further, the explicitly religious nature of much of Eliot's rhetoric, while it would have been distasteful to the producers of the *vanguardista* magazine *revista de avance*, meets no resistance in its encounter with *Orígenes*. As we have established, the journal situates itself in the multifarious and dynamic Catholic cultural tradition of its context. Lezama, Gaztelu, Vitier, and, to a lesser extent, Rodríguez Feo, all evidence not only an allegiance to Catholicism as a means of self-definition, but also as a constellation of images and discourses that can be manipulated in the development of a personal ethics, aesthetics and politics. Further, *origenistas* assert a particularly catholic Catholicism, and thus the journal is open to the expression of distinct religious experiences. Barely troubled by the issue of blasphemy, the journal provides an established Catholic thematics without a predetermined dogma that would restrict divergent opinions. These qualities are nonetheless hardly tested by Eliot's texts. The imagery of Eliot's Anglicanism is quite close to Catholicism. Yet, as we will see, Eliot's religiosity is more

consonant with the Catholicism of Cintio Vitier than with the boldly heterodox religiosity of Lezama.

As we have seen, “East Coker” and “Burnt Norton” posit a complex vision of the basic ontological questions it puts forth. Thus, we must be careful to assert precisely what aspect of the discourses constructed in the poems is consonant or dissonant with its new Cuban context. This kind of care is especially necessary when discussing Eliot’s purported mysticism, which, as we have seen, is neither a fanatic rejection of physical experience nor an intimation of the possibility of dwelling infinitely in a state of metaphysical perfection. Nor is his mysticism an assertion of total passivity in the face of concrete exigencies. The poems enact cyclical movements of abnegation of, and enlightened re-engagement with, sensory experience and living-in-time. As we have asserted above, the intent of the poems is not to espouse one or the other clearly defined agenda in opposition to another, but rather to suggest the inevitable liminality, the “in-betweenness” of human experience. The poems do not resolve into static conceptual formations; in the discourse of each of the *Quartets*, “the detail of the pattern is movement.” Yet, as perceived by Lezama and Rodríguez Feo, Eliot’s mysticism is excessively pessimistic and passive.

### **The Parallels of Eliot and Vitier**

When examining Eliot’s poems in relation to the work of Cintio Vitier, a number of similarities arise. The delicate and dynamic balance Eliot strikes in the poems—between the worldly and the transcendent, between the temporal and the eternal, between chaos and order, resonates sympathetically with Vitier’s poetics. In “Poesía Como

Fidelidad,” Vitier uses the image of the burning bush to illustrate what he believes is poetry’s greatest ontological contribution: a vision of the “interpenetration” of the tangible and the numinous, the temporal and the atemporal:

...las experiencias de la realidad concreta, sin dejar de ser temporales, son al mismo tiempo imágenes de lo eterno. La zarza ardiendo que ve Moisés no es mitológica, sino terrenal e inmediata, pero a la vez, en su misma fibra incandescente, revela otra cosa. La revelación o el símbolo utiliza aquí lo real y cotidiano ... [e]l tiempo y la eternidad, los sucesos de la familia y de la especie, las experiencias personales y el drama de la redención, se interpenetran y fecundan, en un incesante nacimiento de símbolos trascendentes. (27)

...experiences of concrete reality, without ceasing to be temporal, are at the same time images of the eternal. The burning bush that Moses sees is not mythological, but rather earthly and immediate. But, at the same time, in its very incandescent fiber, it reveals something else. The revelation or the symbol here utilizes the real and quotidian ... [t]ime and eternity, family events and the events of the species, personal experiences and the drama of redemption, all interpenetrate and fecundate, in an incessant birth of transcendental symbols.

It is important to recognize that Vitier asserts the coexistence of the divine and mundane. In this kind of world, a particular kind of vision is necessary; if the poet can see like Moses sees, she will be witness to the transcendental symbol.

Eliot is interested in advocating a similar kind of vision, though he focuses more attention on the preparatory disciplines one must exercise in order to be purified for such

a vision. For Eliot, when one has disciplined the senses and the will, one can achieve a “grace of sense,” in which there is elevation of the mundane “without motion,” “without elimination,” and in which the mind can achieve a “concentration” of the sensible into a vision of transcendence (Burnt Norton 73-75).

In his essay “Nemosine: Datos para una poética,” Vitier makes an assertion that is strikingly similar: “Todo pensamiento poético tiene que partir de la unidad en lo heterogéneo, de la síntesis que no anula sino exalta y paradójicamente ilumina la fruición de lo múltiple” (“Every mode of poetic thought must depart from the unity in the heterogeneous, from the synthesis that does not annul, but rather exalts and paradoxically illuminates the fruition of the multiple”) (36). Both Vitier and Eliot assert the necessity of “exaltation” without alteration, affirming the possibility of a transcendent vision that does not modify the physical world nor lift off from it into the non-sensory. Instead, the vision occurs in the “very incandescent fiber” of phenomena.

Further, Vitier asserts the interpenetration of time and eternity, which is akin to Eliot’s reconciliations. More specifically, both poets reconcile themselves with linear time as a means for discovering the eternity that inhabits each instant, like the “lifetime burning in every moment” evoked at the end of “East Coker” (194). The willingness of Eliot’s speakers to see temporality as potentially redemptive is a quality advocated by Vitier in his essays. Eliot’s speaker asserts that one must first accept time, and subsequently employ memory as a means of “conquer[ing]” it (Burnt Norton 89). Vitier asserts the importance of “being possessed by time” in order to receive an “infusion of its generative energy” (“Estar poseído por el tiempo... la infusión de su energía generadora”) (Nemosine 31).



Vitier alludes to the classical association of art with memory in his title's reference to the Muse of Memory, mother of all muses. For him, memory is the faculty that facilitates the transposition of experience into poetry (40). It is a paradoxical faculty, in its embodiment of the same kind of reconciliation of opposites that Eliot describes. Memory consists of a simultaneous presence and absence that allows access to an understanding of "essences" (40). Eliot presents time as an initial obstacle that can be overcome only when it is embraced. Vitier's poetry and essays assert that an experience of longing and nostalgia in the face of time—clearly a similarly agonistic relationship—can be transformed into an experience of regeneration when one gives oneself over to the inevitability of time-as-progression.

Clearly, Eliot and Vitier's assertions are cognate in terms of philosophical and religious content. But even further, the poets' attitudes toward the revelations poetry makes possible are similar. As we have established, Vitier is much more modest than Lezama in his description of the spiritual powers of the poet. Vitier describes the fundamental stance of the poet as passive and longing. Poetic labor establishes an openness to revelation, but does not enact that revelation. This attitude is consonant with the comportment of the mystic generally, and specifically with the stances of the speakers of "Burnt Norton" and "East Coker." The profound humility with which the speaker of "East Coker" instructs his soul to "...wait without hope/ For hope would be hope for the wrong thing..." (123-24) is exemplary of a crucial aspect of Vitier's concept of poetic "fidelity," an act of "consent" ("consentimiento"), "obedience" ("obediencia"), and "acceptance" ("aceptación) (Fidelidad 28). For both poets, this passivity does not result in a disengagement with reality; on the contrary, for Vitier it allows one to be "...in line

with reality” (“...en la línea de la realidad”) (Fidelidad 28). For Eliot, the waiting that obliterates “hope,” “love,” and “thought” delivers the mystic to a scene where the transcendent illuminates a concrete landscape of “...running streams, and winter lightning./ The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry...” (“East Coker” 129-30).

Finally, Eliot’s metapoetic reflections complement a similar tendency in Vitier’s poetry. Vitier’s work is characterized by its frequent engagements with problematics of all kinds, and the difficulties of verbal communication find a particularly prominent place in the texture of his poetic reflections. In “El desposeído,” the speaker feels dispossessed of language, just as he feels alienated from the concrete world that surrounds him: “No son mías las palabras ni las cosas./ Ellas tienen sus fiestas, sus asuntos/ que a mí no me conciernen” (“Neither words nor things are mine./ They have their celebrations, their issues/ that do not concern me”) (1-2). Because it is seen to be essentially exterior to the subjectivity of the speaker, language proves frustrating as a means of expressing interior states. Thus, the speakers of Vitier’s poems often reflect on the meaning of their own names, grappling with the tension between the exteriority that language confers and the intimate reality that it incompletely signifies. In “Poema,” there is a “longing/ abyss” (“el abismo/ anhelante”) (136-37) in the speaker’s name, in which something of the person is present, but is still trapped in an exteriority subject to the emptiness of language. In this sense naming bears witness to the absence in language of real presence or real human connection.

These are similar to the problematics Eliot tackles in “Burnt Norton” and “East Coker,” though Eliot takes a different approach. For the speakers of these poems, language is also an alienated externality to be manipulated for the purpose of interior

expression, a purpose that is repeatedly frustrated. Yet the frustration of the speakers is less emotionally and existentially profound; they see the effective manipulation of language as an accomplishment to be evaluated against a tradition, rather than as a measure of intellectual, emotional and spiritual authenticity. Thus, the speaker of “East Coker” describes his rhetoric as “not very satisfactory” (68), and measures it against the standard of his predecessors (179-85). Polysemy’s betrayals are more of a threat to a sense of mastery than to a concept of the self. Yet, this attitude is a reaction to the same failure to express profoundly personal ideas that one finds in Vitier’s work. The significance of what Eliot’s speakers long to communicate is equally great. The impetus in Eliot’s poem is the same, though the reaction to failure takes a distinct attitudinal form.

### **Eliot and Lezama: Incommensurate Histories**

In contrast to the many points of concurrence between Eliot and Vitier, the interaction between Eliot’s poems and the dominant theoretical structure of *Orígenes* established by Lezama is conflictive. In his essay “Mitos y cansancio clásico,” Lezama uses Eliot as a foil for his own assertions about the role of poetic production in relation to history. Though the essay was first published in 1957, a year after the dissolution of the journal, its assertions summarize a general dissonance between Eliot’s poetics and Lezama’s agenda for *Orígenes*. Lezama associates Eliot with a general “historical” outlook against which the Cuban poet defines his entire poetics. According to Lezama, Eliot sees time as rigid, and history as an immutable and intimidating edifice that testifies to the inadequacy of human agency in the present. Lezama asserts that Eliot’s thinking is determined by his role as literary critic rather than by his imaginative capacities as poet.

Lezama introduces this assertion slyly, in a revision of Eliot's phrase "the mythic method" to read "the mythic-critical method" ("el método ... mítico-crítico") (13). In Lezama's exaggerated depiction, the critic is simply a "glosser" of the tradition (13); his attitude in relation to the tradition is passive and submissive.

This attitude in turn creates what Lezama calls Eliot's "pessimistic" and "crepuscular" attitude toward the nature of poetic pursuits in the present. If the poet is essentially a crepuscular critic, "...he believes that creation was realized by the ancients, and all that is left to the contemporaries is a game of combinations" ("...él cree que la creación fue realizada por los antiguos y que a los contemporáneos sólo nos resta el juego de las combinatorias") (13). Lezama, in contrast, is an auroral critic and poet, who emphasizes the moment of an image's coming-into-being, rather than instances of its imperfect repetition. His poetics insists on the limitless potential for poetic creation. As César Salgado asserts, Lezama's optimism about the possibilities for creation in the present is founded on a vision of a creative continuum between antiquity and innovation (229).<sup>13</sup> Thus, a reverence for the tradition does not justify a despairing passivity.

Not only does Lezama disagree with what he sees as Eliot's sense of division and alienation from the creativity of a classical past. The Cuban poet also differs profoundly with what he believes is Eliot's conception of the ontology of that past. Seen through the lens of Lezama's poetic historiography, Eliot's vision of the past is essentially a reification of a complex of dynamics. History is a space in which images are in constant interaction. Out of this imagistic material, Lezama asserts the importance of creating new myths, rather than interminably glossing old ones. Instead of Eliot's critical method, the poet should employ a "fictional" one (12), in which poetic activity is constantly and

limitlessly creative. As we have asserted before, Lezama portrays poetic language as a force that intervenes in history, preventing any kind of stability in its meanings. This action is possible because Lezama portrays history not as a conglomeration of facts, but rather as a dynamic constellation of image systems. Thus the way history should be divided is according to discrete “eras of the imagination” (“eras imaginarias”), in which a certain usage of imagery predominates (14). Since these image systems are penetrable by the artist at any time in history, they are endlessly manipulable, in direct conflict with what Lezama sees as Eliot’s servile reverence for history and tradition.

In “Mitos y cansancio clásico,” Lezama uses a passage from “East Coker” (182-89) as evidence of his assertions about Eliot’s attitude toward history. In this passage, the speaker asserts that “...what there is to conquer/ By strength or submission, has already been discovered/ Once or twice, or several times...” (182-84). Lezama makes selective and deceptive use of Eliot’s poem, the complexity of which we have been at pains to illustrate in this study. The speaker’s statement of defeat in the face of an imposing tradition must be seen, not as an isolated declaration, but rather as a stage in the development of a discourse of liminality between time-as-destruction and time-as-redemption, between defeated human agency and the assertion that “[i]n my end is my beginning” (“East Coker,” 209).

Furthermore, in “East Coker,” the attitude toward tradition itself is not nearly as simple as Lezama makes it appear. We need only remember the speaker’s bitter questioning of “the knowledge of dead secrets” bequeathed to him by hebetudinous predecessors (73-83), to realize that the speaker is engaged in an intellectual movement of oscillation between distinct notions of tradition. This speaker, like Lezama, believes

that the present changes “the pattern” of the past that our notions of history try to maintain: “The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,/ For the pattern is new in every moment” (84-85).

Lezama’s agenda in “Mitos” is the advancement of his own vision of the relations between poetics and history, rather than a careful reading of Eliot’s poetry. His use of the North American poet’s work is shaped by this agenda. Eliot is available to Lezama as a poetic foil, for two essential reasons. First, the general thematics of Eliot’s poetry and prose, with its emphasis on the question of tradition, has lead many readers to see only the nostalgia for an orderly society rooted in a restrictive reliance on the past that one finds in such essays as *After Strange Gods* and “Notes Toward a Definition of Culture.” Second, the pessimistic metapoetic reflections in “East Coker,” which are “at hand” because of the poem’s appearance in *Orígenes*, support the vision of a crepuscular poetics Lezama outlines in contrast to his own poetics.

César Salgado suggests that Lezama specifically reacts against the later Eliot, whereas he greatly respected the younger poet of *The Waste Land*. Salgado asserts that Lezama saw this older Eliot as an “. . . ultra-orthodox Anglican of quasi-inquisitorial aesthetic intolerances” (“. . .el anglicano ultra-ortodoxo de intolerancias estéticas quasi-inquisitoriales”) (229). Of course, this study seeks to develop a more complex vision of Eliot, based on a reading of the concept of liminality in “Burnt Norton” and “East Coker.” Methodologically, we have resisted Lezama’s use of a generalization about the poet’s world-vision in our readings of the complexity of the *Quartets*. Nonetheless, Salgado’s assertion is important. It suggests, as we attempt to illustrate here, the operativeness of a generalized vision of Eliot *the person* in Lezama’s approach to the

poems. When Salgado, in paraphrasing Lezama, asserts that “East Coker” represents a “quietist” perspective (229), he touches on the question of mysticism, which is precisely the discursive node that concerns this study. Eliot’s use of mystic ideas in the *Quartets* is for Lezama evidence of an agenda of total annihilation of the individual will in the exercise of contemplating God.

### **“East Coker” and “Burnt Norton” in Spanish: Translation as Caricature**

As we will see, the conceptual foundation for Lezama’s selective use of Eliot is of great consequence, because it proves to be operative in the interpretation that Rodríguez Feo mobilizes in his translations for *Orígenes*. Rodríguez Feo’s translations of Eliot’s poems break down the liminality, relationality and “in-betweenness” that structure the originals. The translations undermine many of the poet’s attempts to enact and illustrate delicate reconciliations between time-as-progression and time-as-unity, between order and chaos, and between the experience of the body and the abnegation of that experience for the purposes of spiritual elevation. As a result, the poems, as presented in *Orígenes*, seem to make more categorical judgments that affirm or negate one or the other pole of what is a carefully balanced duality in the originals. Rather than mapping out a fruitfully ambiguous space between opposites, the translations make categorical affirmations or negations of one or the other element in the duality. In doing so, Rodríguez Feo generally does not introduce new elements, but rather enacts emphases and obfuscations that disturb the conceptual balance of the poems.<sup>14</sup>

These multiple shifts of emphasis from the liminal space to the space of clear affirmation or rejection occur in four of the poem’s thematic areas: time, death, order,

and abnegation. The redemptive interpenetrations of time-as-progression and synchronicity in the poems are obscured, suggesting an attitude in which time is seen as a rigid and alienating linearity. Since this image of Eliot's work is operative in Rodríguez Feo's mind, it is not surprising to observe that the translations fabricate a fearful attitude toward death. A negative view of temporality and a fear of death are intertwined in this conceptual distortion. Also, the speakers' assertion of a broader order to be found in the chaos and multiplicity of the phenomenal world is suppressed in the translations. As a result, the translations express a negative view of physical existence. If orderliness is not to be found in the physical world, then a more total rejection of that world is thus upheld. This implication is supported by moments in which the translations portray the speakers as recoiling from the concrete world and seeking to break free into a realm of pure spirit. All of these distorted images will become clear as we analyze the recurring translational interventions to be found in Rodríguez Feo's renderings.

Many of Rodríguez Feo's manipulations of Eliot's poems bear a distinct relationship to Lezama's characterization of Eliot in "Mitos y cansancio clásico." Reading the translations, it appears that Rodríguez Feo has put Lezama's critique of Eliot's ideas about temporality and the role of the artist into practice in the very act of translation. Yet Lezama's essay appears after the dissolution of *Orígenes*, so the relationship is not one of cause and effect, where the translator's reading of Lezama's essay creates a conceptual template for the analysis that goes into the translation. Instead, this consonance of approach to Eliot is illustrative of an underlying perspective on the poet's work that is shared by the two editors.



Both men react to Eliot's philosophy and religiosity in an exaggerated fashion, producing an image of Eliot as a passive person who thoroughly rejects life in the concrete world. In this way, the translations magnify the version of Eliot we are shown at the opening of "Burnt Norton," a man who feels dominated by the passing of time and who passively contemplates a love that was never achieved, rather than seeking that love and giving action to his desires. This exaggerated image of Eliot casts a shadow over the entirety of Rodríguez Feo's translations of both poems. Thus, the operative dynamic in Rodríguez translations stems from a coherent system of misinterpretations of Eliot's personality. These misinterpretations enforce parallel misreadings of the conceptual structure of the poems.

Within Rodríguez Feo and Lezama's shared assumptions about Eliot, an operative notion of mysticism is at work. Rodríguez Feo alters the notion of a mystic discipline in Eliot's poems according to an exaggerated sense of the mystic's withdrawal from the world. A resigned and pessimistic view of concrete phenomena, manifested in passivity, repression of the body and its desires, and the surrender of agency, are ascribed to Eliot's speakers. This occurs because Rodríguez Feo supports Lezama's essential attitude toward the mystic tradition handed down to the Hispanic world through the crucial textual node of St. John of the Cross's writings.

As we asserted in the general chapter on *Orígenes*, Lezama's celebrations of San Juan's contributions emphasize the mystic's heterodoxy. St. John's use of a discourse of the body in religious contemplation and his assertion of individual approaches to the divine are attractive to Lezama because they parallel the religiosity undergirding his own poetics. Lezama, in turn, believes that St. John's heterodoxy must be continued, rather

than allowed to fossilize. The moment at which Lezama's fisherman, surrounded by the light of the divine, begins to urinate, is the definitive enunciation of this agenda.

As we have seen, Ángel Gaztelu's elaboration of a *sanjuanista* poetics of the body also engages in this process, though it does so within the context of the priest-poet's more traditional Catholicism. Lezama, unlike Gaztelu, revises the essential humility and passivity prescribed by San Juan's mystic discipline into a radical affirmation of the power of poetry to enact moments of enlightenment and transcendence, rather than simply portray the longing and the striving toward those goals.

In "Burnt Norton," two translation acts add extra emphasis to the speaker's sense of entrapment in temporal linearity. The first is a subtle intervention, the insertion of line breaks before and after the speaker's question: "But to what purpose/ Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves/ I do not know" (16-18) ("Pero para qué/ Perturbar el polvo sobre el bol de pétalos de rosas/ No lo sé") (16-18). We must remember that this question comes after the speaker feels magnetized toward a return in time to a rose garden where a lost romance might be salvaged. The speaker breaks from this wishfulness to express the hopelessness of disturbing the past. The translation sets this statement off, visually emphasizing it, an act consonant with the operative image of Eliot and his speakers as passive and regretful in the face of time.

At the closing of "East Coker," the translation eliminates a tab spacing that comes before the poem's last sentence: "In my end is my beginning" (209) ("En mi fin está mi principio") (300). The translation is semantically faithful to the original, such that the concept of redemption through cyclicity is communicated. Nonetheless, the absence of

a space eliminates the visual emphasis on the closing statement. As a result, the more optimistic tone with which the poem ends is muted.

A shift in verb tense at the opening of “East Coker” also obscures the implications of the vision of the dancers in the field: “The association of man and woman/ In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie...” (28-29). Whereas the original narrates the vision in the present tense, making the past vividly present, the translation introduces future and conditional tenses. For “...you can hear the music” (25), the translation gives “...podrás escuchar la música” (25) (“...you will be able to hear the music”). “And see them dancing...” (27) becomes “Y los verás danzar...” (27) (“And you will see them dance”). In the original, the present tense supports the synchronicity that allows characters animated from a sixteenth-century text to physically inhabit a space shared by the speaker in the present timeframe of the poem. In the translation, this synchronicity is deferred and made conditional. The presentness of the past enacted in the poetic discourse of the original is thus obscured.

This alteration of verb tense is followed by a translation act that further obscures the sense of the synchronicity that the vision of the dancers evokes. Rodríguez Feo makes no attempt to replicate the sixteenth-century spellings Eliot uses in his description of the dance. Eliot’s discursive evocation of a notion of the suspension of linear time through genealogical memory is thus nearly absent in the translation. Because of the alterations of verb tense and the suppression of the antiquated spellings, readers of the Spanish are not given the sense that the dancers are from the past until they reach the line that reads: “Mirth of those long since under earth” (38) (“Alegría de aquellos mucho

tiempo ha bajo la tierra”) (39), sixteen lines into the description. This interval marks a significant disruption of the sense of an intersection between the past and present.

It is clear from a letter to Lezama dated April, 1946, wherein Rodríguez Feo instructs Lezama to make corrections to a typed proof of the translation of “East Coker,” that the translator is only interested in ascertaining how the English words might be brought into contemporary Spanish (35-36). It is possible that Rodríguez Feo is unaware of the passage’s origins in a text penned by one of Eliot’s ancestors. If he were aware of that fact, it seems his attention would be drawn to the constellation of personal and poetic significance surrounding Eliot’s recourse to that early text.

It is also possible, nonetheless, that Rodríguez Feo is aware of the provenance of the “daunsinge” passage, but is simply not interested in conveying its feeling and its implications in translation. Such an attitude seems plausible, as nothing in his own or in the general philosophy of *Orígenes* stresses the idea of ancestry. *Origenismo* is a poetic ideology of the individual’s creative relationship to national culture on the one hand, and to a flexibly defined religious tradition on the other. To Rodríguez Feo, Eliot’s use of an ancestral linkage might seem a snobbish and exclusive attitude, exacerbating the negative vision of Eliot’s personality that is already active in the translator’s thinking.

As a logical extension of the exaggeration of the sense of linear time’s oppressive inevitability, the translations of “Burnt Norton” and “East Coker” introduce a fear of death into those poems, where the attitude in the original is more distanced, impartial and philosophical. As we have asserted, the speakers of the original poems do not fear death, not only because they operate in an analytical mode that confers a certain degree of

distance from the reality, but also because faith in an afterlife informs the poems' conceptual approach.

We have established that section four of "East Coker" seeks to impart a wisdom that welcomes death as release and deliverance into resurrection. Employing a discourse of paradox, the speaker portrays a hospital as a site wherein disease is a kind of health, and death promises restoration. The speaker expands on this view of death by asserting that we are fortunate to "Die of that paternal care/ That will not leave us, but prevents us everywhere" (160-61). The "paternal care" is God's act of making human beings mortal and inflecting life with reminders of mortality. This care, an ironic inversion of what might seem to be neglect, is part of God's plan. Eliot carefully chooses the verb "prevents" at line 161. The verb does not just suggest that mortality is a fundamental limitation placed on human life. The etymological meaning of the verb (to come before), gives the sense that our mortality precedes us, that it is established in God's determinations before our birth. Thus the sense of "prevents" is not schematically and immediately negative. Rather than suggest a menace, it upholds a discourse that portrays death from a calm philosophical and theological distance. Rodríguez Feo renders the phrase "prevents us" as "nos atormentará" (162) ("will torment us"). The concept of death thus undergoes two alterations. Most obviously, death becomes a source of suffering. The act of intellection and faith inherent in the positive portrayal of death in the original is distorted into an act of fear. More subtly, the transposition of the verb from the present to the future tense ("it *will* torment us") is consonant with this assertion of a terror of death, as it places the arrival of death in an indeterminate future. The original, in the phrase "prevents us everywhere," asserts the presence of mortality at

every moment of life, a presence that, as we have asserted, gives meaning to life, rather than casting a pall over it.

This dramatic darkening of the speaker's attitude toward mortality is predicted in a more subtle refraction that occurs in section three of "East Coker." In his evocation of the *ubi sunt* motif, Eliot asserts the absolute equality conferred upon all human beings by mortality. Statesmen and laborers alike meet the same fate. This assertion is bolstered by the neutral factuality of the verb "to go": "They all go into the dark" (101). This movement from life to death is presented in a matter-of-fact tone. In Rodríguez Feo's translation, "to go" becomes "to fall" (*caer*): "Todos caen en la oscuridad" (102). The resulting negative shading portrays death as a defeat, rather than something accepted calmly. In the translation, death is suggested to be something one must be careful to avoid, for its arrival is a menacing prospect. Furthermore, as the event of death becomes a fall, the afterlife becomes an abyss. The image of falling into darkness suggests the uncertainty of any kind of arrival. Again, the translation obscures the idea of resurrection that supports the notion that time and death can be redemptive.

In addition to the effects that the translations have on the concepts of temporality and mortality, Rodríguez Feo's rendering of the original poems suppresses the idea of the pattern, a concept that provides an overarching structure for both poems. As we have seen in the original poems, the pattern is a reconciliation of change and stasis. By means of an elevation of perspective, chaotic details resolve into broader orders. Yet, in the translations, the patterns are blurred.

The most obvious example of this blurring is the inconsistency with which Rodríguez Feo translates the word "pattern." At line 142 of "Burnt Norton," he translates

it as “el diseño” (“design”), a decent representation of the concept of order. Yet, in three other instances, “pattern” is translated as “forma” (“form”) (“East Coker” 85, 86 and 192; “Burnt Norton” 60). “Form” is an inadequate replacement for “pattern,” as it does not denote the coordination of disparate specifics in the same way. The interaction of opposites in the concept of the pattern—stasis and movement, order and chaos—is not carried over in the translation.

An example of this problem comes in section two of “Burnt Norton.” In the tightly structured verse that opens this poem, the speaker describes how “...the boarhound and the boar/ Pursue their pattern as before...” (59-60). Though the two animals are in movement, their movements reinforce nature’s unchanging pattern of predation. Yet, when “their pattern” becomes “sus formas” (60), the sense of a resolution of change into constancy is lost. The animals are simply pursuing shapes.

In this same passage, the breakdown of the notion of the pattern is also obscured in the translation of the term “boarhound.” The phrase “the boarhound and the boar” underlines the unchanging relationship between the two animals in the repetition that the naming of those animals enacts. The line break Eliot places after “the boar” creates a slight pause that heightens the musical effect of the repetition. The translation does not provide the same sense of symmetry. The boarhound is rendered simply as “perro,” or “dog” (59). The translation portrays the basic action denoted in the line, but communicates little of its resonances with the original’s theme of the pattern. This distortion does not arise from a linguistic incommensurability. Since “boarhound” could be translated as “perro de jabalí,” “jabalí” could be repeated in a fashion similar to the original.

Focusing our attention on this same passage, we notice an example of a crucial element in the translations' suppression of the notion of the pattern. Whereas we have noted the carefully gauged rhythm and rhyme of the opening of section two of "Burnt Norton," the translation does not attempt to recreate those qualities. Because of the differing rhythmic tendencies of English and Spanish, Rodríguez Feo would have to make some semantic and syntactic alterations in order to give a sense of Eliot's iambic tetrameter. Further alterations would be necessary to replicate Eliot's rhyming couplets in this section. Yet, as we have seen, Rodríguez Feo focuses on the transfer of content over form. This is true throughout both translations, and is particularly noticeable in the second section of each poem.

Rodríguez Feo's decision is understandable, though it has a discernible effect on the original that happens to be consonant with the underlying system of biases that has created other distortions. The absence of a sense of Eliot's musical devices has an effect on the communication of the two fundamental conceptual effects the poet hopes to achieve. First, Eliot's musical structures give support to the concept of pattern explored in the poems themselves. The diachronic nature of the discourse is balanced by synchronic features, and the poems derive coherence from the musical pattern of transitions and relationships. Second, these transitions and relationships mirror the concept of relationality or "betweenness" that is also so central to the poems. Eliot's assertion, in "The Music of Poetry," of the importance of the moments of transition between the prosaic and the lyrical illustrates the importance of this concept of relationality. Emphasizing the transition, Eliot elevates liminality. Liminality is both a



“thing” that can be identified as a structuring element in the poems and a relationship between things. This duality is a crucial element in the poems’ conceptual schema.

The final thematic point that Rodríguez Feo’s translations center on is the notion of abnegation. As we have seen, the speakers of both poems rehearse a mystic discipline that involves the rejection of sense experience and of limited conceptions of the divine, in order to arrive at a zone of darkness that allows for the light of God to become visible. There is no doubt that Eliot’s interpretation of this tradition is sympathetic; his speakers clearly affirm a belief in their value. Yet, as we have asserted, the poems are not meant as total rejections of the life of the senses. Instead, spiritual enlightenment is seen as breaking away from concrete experience, only to return the practitioner to the physical realm with an altered consciousness and a vision of the illumination of the worldly by the transcendent. This return allows for a “grace of sense” surrounding the mystic darkness and emptiness. This “grace” allows the practitioner to be aware of the interpenetration of the worldly and the divine, a state of affairs that does not necessitate the “elimination” of one reality in order for the other to be visible.

Yet, Rodríguez Feo shows evidence of a schematized view of the mysticism Eliot’s poems espouse. The emphasis in this view is on abnegation. In section two of “Burnt Norton,” the speaker offers a description of the duality of the denial of the body and the persistence of the “grace of sense.” This grace is figured as a “light,” in contrast to the darkness of renunciation. Rodríguez Feo’s translation communicates these concepts clearly, though one word choice betrays his slant on Eliot’s mysticism. Where the speaker describes “The release from action and suffering” (71), the translation reads: “La huída de la acción y el sufrimiento” (72) (“The flight from action and suffering”).

The concept of flight undermines the very notion of abnegation that is active in the original, where striving and desire are calmly left behind. By making the speaker espouse a fleeing of action and suffering, the translation paradoxically suggests a continued enslavement to action and suffering. One who flees from life in the world of desire is ironically still trapped there.

The result of this refraction is a subtle negation of the spiritual nature of abnegation. As flight, abnegation is not enlightening. Instead, the flight from life in the world simply serves to underline the caricatured image of Eliot active in Rodríguez Feo and Lezama's thinking. Rather than a practitioner of a discipline that allows for both an elevation above the concrete world and a transformed return to that world, the image that emerges is of a constitutional fear of action and suffering, an unthinking withdrawal and passivity that do not facilitate any kind of enlightenment.

A final example of this distortion of the mysticism of the two poems comes near the end of "East Coker." As occurs at the end of "Burnt Norton," the speaker turns to the concept of divine love. In "Burnt Norton," it is established that this love is an important embodiment of many of the dualities both poems describe: desire and transcendence, "movement" (164) and stasis, time and eternity. Love bridges these dualities, in a Christian sense, because it is the human feeling that most closely approximates the principle of God. When experienced fully, it is both desire and an elevation above desire. From a Christian perspective, it is the worldly embodiment of the divine.

Thus, the human experience of love does not imply the total rejection of the worldly. The speaker of "East Coker" does assert that love alters the human perspective, such that "...here and now cease to matter" (201). This implication of an elevation above

the plane of space and time is distorted in the translation where love causes the obliteration of that plane: “...el *aquí* y el *ahora* dejan de ser” (202) (“...*here* and *now* cease to be”). Again, Rodríguez Feo’s translation identifies a concept that is demonstrably in the text, though he enacts an exaggeration that upsets the delicate dialectical balance Eliot seeks to sustain in the poems. As a result, rather than the sense of an elevation that still allows for a return, or “re-conversion” to the worldly, the translation offers the caricatured image of total rejection.

In summary, Rodríguez Feo epitomizes the activist, rather than the analytical mode of translation. His “independence” is not “...pursued for the sake of the original in order to reproduce it as a living work” (Bassnett-McGuire 82). Instead, it is pursued toward a definite cultural agenda. This agenda is essentially oppositional; Eliot’s texts are processed for incorporation into the context of *Orígenes* in order to highlight a set of contrasts between the North American’s poetics and the poetics of the magazine. As we have seen, this agenda flattens out the variegations in Eliot’s poetic response to mystic traditions in order to present an image of the poet and of his work that stands opposite to the dominant response to the relationship between *origenismo* and the mysticism of St. John of the Cross. As we have seen, Cintio Vitier’s work is the exception to this general response, as its poetic and theological tendencies resonate sympathetically with Eliot’s poems.

### **Conclusion: Catholicism-Mysticism-Protestantism**

Taking a step back from the series of textual interactions we have described in this chapter, we see a number of incompatibilities Rodríguez Feo and Lezama perceive,

and subsequently highlight, through translation and critique. Eliot's work inevitably enters into a conflictive relationship with its new context because both editors of the journal deploy a jaundiced view of the poet's personality, which they believe represents a particular set of sociological tendencies associated with Anglo-American culture. In this conflicted terrain, one can see through a surface dissonance to a broader impasse of cultural interaction.

Thus, at the heart of the reactions against Eliot's poems are a set of distinctions between Eliot's cultural context and the cultural systems *Orígenes* implicitly works to defend and develop. This cultural system, in accordance with the agonistic relationship between Cuba and the U.S., is defined in a differentiation from the Anglo Other. This Other is implicitly materialist, while Latin American Catholic culture is spiritual. Anglo society is organized around the repression of bodily desires and of sense experience in favor of a rigid righteousness and an abstract cast of mind that rejects the tangible. The realities of the senses and of desire are thus fearful to the Anglo. As we have seen, the translations of Eliot's poems illustrate the fact that he stands as a representative of this repressive culture in the translator's thinking.

Paradoxically, the nexus for the assertion of Eliot's grounding in these "Protestant" meaning systems is the poet's use of Spanish Catholic mysticism. Lezama and Rodríguez Feo evidence a distorted sense of the meaning of their own mystic Catholic tradition, believing that it involves a complete rejection of the physical world. As we have seen, this revisionist project is active at the very earliest stages of the *Orígenes* group's development. Eliot's connection to Spanish mystic doctrines paradoxically throws his Anglo-Protestant cultural association into relief, provoking the

subtle and multifarious cultural counterpoints embedded in Rodríguez Feo's translations and Lezama's essay.

Rodríguez Feo's translation responds to and exaggerates the operation of a concept of the mystic discipline in "East Coker" and "Burnt Norton." Abnegation is, in all forms of mysticism, a means for enlightenment, but after that moment of enlightenment, the mystic must continue to live in the body. The return to a worldly existence after the moment of enlightenment in Eliot's poems is based on an understanding of the theistic, rather than the monistic basis for St. John's mysticism. In this understanding, the identity of the mystic is not completely dissolved in the moment of union with God. Remaining distinct from his object of devotion, the mystic must continue to live a human life, albeit one illuminated by his encounter with the divine. Eliot's poems explore this challenge.

Because of the assumptions about mysticism that are present in the earliest expressions of *origenismo*, there is little room in the conceptual context of *Orígenes* for Eliot's exploration to unfold. As we have seen, there is no notion of the return or "re-conversion" in the *origenista* vision of St. John. The result is a pressure exerted by the incommensurability of Eliot's and the journal's religious thinking. This pressure distorts the originals in the ways we have analyzed above.

The fact that the response to the idea of abnegation is mobilized by Lezama and Rodríguez Feo by the means we have analyzed here shows the importance of asserting a certain element of what they see as their Catholic cultural identity—the refusal to denigrate the spiritual value of the body and its drives. This stance toward corporality clearly informs Lezama's poetics, which is infused with the language of sexuality and

reproduction. What we have glimpsed in our analysis of Eliot's incorporation into *Orígenes* is how active Lezama's poetics is in Rodríguez Feo's operations as translator. At other moments in this study, it becomes clear where the two editors diverge, philosophically and methodologically. Yet here, the incorporation of Eliot's poems into the journal illustrates a profound and tacit concurrence in the two editors' thinking. We are brought back to Rodríguez Feo's comment to Wallace Stevens about St. John of the Cross with an increased awareness of its importance. When the Cuban editor and translator asserts that "...St. John of the Cross was not a mystic poet, but was a mystic who wrote the most perfect poetry of the Spanish language" (Secretaries 95), he betrays his belief that mysticism and poetry are incompatible. This belief is built on the assumption that mysticism is wholly non-sensory, while poetry must be a sensuous, and sensual, medium.

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### Notes to Chapter Three

<sup>1</sup> Gordon's two volume biography of Eliot is the most useful, as the author was allowed greater access to manuscripts than other biographers. The excellent collection of essays edited by Edward Lobb is the first work to consult on Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

<sup>2</sup> The original essay, "The Quartets," was published in 1947 in a revised and expanded edition of the 1935 study *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot: An Essay on the Nature of Poetry*. It is most likely that Matthiessen, who had been a tutor to Rodríguez Feo when the latter was an undergraduate at Harvard, gave him permission to translate the essay in 1943, the year Rodríguez Feo graduated.

<sup>3</sup> "...uno de los críticos de más rigor con que cuenta su país..." "...constituye una verdadera complacencia para los editores de ORÍGENES."

<sup>4</sup> "Los hombres huecos. Una monedita para el viejo," translated by Gastón Baquero.

<sup>5</sup> Rodríguez Feo most likely found the essay in *Partisan Review*, which he read quite carefully (see *Secretaries of the Moon* 45, 84, 152). The essay was expanded into the book-length *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, published in 1948.

<sup>6</sup> In its summer, 1944 issue, *Partisan Review* publishes responses to Eliot's essay by R. P. Blackmur, Clement Greenberg, William Phillips, and I. A. Richards. Phillips asserts that Eliot's ideas on religion pave the way for "...some form of clerical fascism" (307). Greenberg takes Eliot's essay as an opportunity to illustrate the capacity for

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socialism to solve the ethical and political problems religion and the arts never could (305-07).

<sup>7</sup> Lezama also betrays an implicit disdain for cultural “puritanism,” though he is not as explicit as Rodríguez Feo on the subject. Ironically, Lezama chides his younger colleague for his interest in the culture of the U.S., encouraging him to return from the U.S. to Havana.

<sup>8</sup> Irving Babbitt and Charles Lanman introduced Eliot to Indian religions at Harvard (Foster 2). Stephen Medcalf notes that Eliot, in the period of the composition of the *Four Quartets*, saw Eastern and Western sacred traditions as compatible and equally relevant to his poetic projects: “...although in *The Waste Land* Christianity and Hinduism/Buddhism are presented as opposites, which seem to cancel out the possibility of belief in either, in his later verse he pursues the light of one without excluding illumination from the other” (xi). Foster notes that Eliot “...went so far as to declare that he felt the Buddhist Fire Sermon to be as important as the Sermon on the Mount” (3).

<sup>9</sup> Eliot asserts the “...possibilities for verse which bear some analogy to the development of a theme by different groups of instruments; there are possibilities of transitions in a poem comparable to the different movements of a symphony or a quartet; there are possibilities of contrapuntal arrangement of subject-matter. It is in a concert-room, rather than in the opera house, that the germ of a poem may be quickened” (Music 32).

<sup>10</sup> The lotus is a crucial symbol in Hindu and Buddhist traditions. It is associated with the sun, as it typically emerges from a state of submersion to open in warmth and



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sunlight, and is used to symbolize the emergence of life and of wisdom. The lotus is found throughout Hindu creation stories, and the Buddha's birth is symbolized by the flower's emergence.

<sup>11</sup> In the introduction to his instructions on the way to a mystic union with God, St. John of the Cross writes: "Para venir a lo que no sabes,/ has de ir por donde no sabes./ Para venir a lo que no gustas,/ has de ir por donde no gustas./ Para venir a lo que no posees,/ has de ir por donde no posees./ Para venir a lo que no eres,/ has de ir por donde no eres." (p. 11) (To arrive at what you are not,/ you must go through where you do not know./ To arrive a what you do not like,/ you must go through where you do not like./ To arrive at what you do not possess,/ you must go through where you do not possess./ To arrive at what you are not,/ you must go through where you are not.)

<sup>12</sup> For a helpful analysis of the differences between *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, see Jewel Spears Brooker's "From *The Waste Land* to *Four Quartets*: Evolution of a Method."

<sup>13</sup> In his essay "*Ulysses en Paradiso: Joyce, Lezama, Eliot, y el método mítico*," Salgado places Lezama's literary theory and practice (the latter manifested in his novel *Paradiso*) in dialogue with two distinct "mythic methods." The first is Joyce's; as Salgado illustrates, Lezama sought to correct the notion that Joyce's major contribution was merely technical. The Cuban poet drew inspiration from Joyce's use of mythic materials for the construction of an innovative new fiction, and went on to employ his own version of Joyce's methodology in *Paradiso*, without engaging in facile imitation. The second of these methods is Eliot's "mythic-critical" method, which Lezama uses as a

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foil for his own and Joyce's concept of innovation. Salgado asserts that this notion of innovation consists of "...a search, at the same time *reminiscent* and *creative*, for analogies, correspondences and counterpoints through the literary tradition, history and humanity's mythologies" ("...una búsqueda, *reminiscente* y *creadora* a la vez, de analogías, correspondencias y contrapuntos a través de la tradición literaria, la historia y las mitologías de la humanidad") (229).

<sup>14</sup> An examination of the published versions of the poems that would have been available to Rodríguez Feo rules out the possibility that any of the translator's incursions into the texts simply reflect earlier versions. For the purposes of this study, the 1943 edition of *Four Quartets* has been used.

## Chapter Four

### Region, Nation, “Internation”: Allen Tate’s “The New Provincialism” in *Orígenes*

The translation and publication of Allen Tate’s essay “The New Provincialism” in *Orígenes* creates both conflicts and unexpected consonances between Tate’s and the *origenistas*’ notions of the proper relationship of literary expression to national and regional identity.<sup>1</sup> As we will see, Tate’s essay is a surprising addition to the Cuban journal, as its explicitly political stance and its focus on regional cultural differences find odd company in the work of Lezama, Vitier and others. *Orígenes*, as a cultural project, is broadly defined in resistance to both explicit political critique and subnational divisions of cultural identity. As we have established, the journal approaches political issues from a standpoint that values creative work over historical or sociological analysis. Further, we will see that Tate’s use of history as a stable system of meaning in his essay is in profound conflict with Lezama’s poetic historiography.

Nonetheless, Tate’s essay highlights a lesser strain of thinking in *Orígenes* that considers these issues more concretely. In our effort to find a sympathetic context for Tate’s essay in *Orígenes*, we will be led to a consideration of the essays of José Rodríguez Feo. The Cuban author’s critiques of the cultural and ideological effects of North American capitalism provide a surprising conceptual support to the incorporation of Tate’s essay into *Orígenes*. Rodríguez Feo’s methodology itself, with its concrete historical analysis and its coordination of economic, political and cultural issues, is surprisingly consonant with Tate’s work as well. In sketching some of these parallels,

this aspect of Rodríguez Feo's work and of *Orígenes* as a whole, which is not recognized in most scholarship on the journal, is brought to the fore. As a result, our understanding of the journal's general evasions of explicit political engagement becomes more complicated.

Further, Tate's use of religion as a category for defining the difference between Southern and Northern cultures clashes with the religiosity of the Cuban magazine. Religion possesses a strict utility in the conceptual scheme of Tate's essay, while *Orígenes* builds the breadth of its literary, cultural and ethical agenda on foundational Christian ideas. Tate's packaging of Christian religiosity as a sociological phenomenon with a particular usefulness to the advancement of a political program finds no sympathetic resonance in its new textual space.

As we will see at the conclusion of this chapter, Rodolfo Tro's translation illustrates the tensions we will discover in our comparative analysis of Tate's text and its new context. The inoperability of a notion of regionalism in *Orígenes* causes the translation to exert significant pressure on Tate's discourse. Tate's distinction between regional and national ideologies is blurred in the Spanish text, illustrating the difficulty of making such a distinction work in the context of *Orígenes*. Further, the cultural specificity of Tate's references is damaged in the translation, a fact that underscores the impossibility of preserving the meaning of those references in a foreign context.

Nonetheless, the anti-imperialist thrust of Tate's critique survives the translation process, illustrating the space that *Orígenes* opens for concrete cultural and political critique within its discursive boundaries. Tro's translation operates in tandem with Rodríguez Feo's methodologies, establishing this secondary, though crucial mode of

operations in the magazine. Understanding this alternate mode of cultural analysis in *Orígenes* significantly complicates our general understanding of the nature of the magazine.

### **The Origins and Development of a Cultural Agenda**

Throughout his work, Allen Tate constructs a well-developed set of oppositions: science versus poetry, the will versus the imagination, simultaneity versus history, the industrial versus the agrarian way of life. In the essay he contributes to *Orígenes*, “The New Provincialism,” he ties together a number of these oppositions under the unifying duality of provincialism versus regionalism. In each of these oppositions, Tate associates the first element with the North, while the second is connected to his personal vision of the South. Some of these dualities describe not only the differences between two cultures, but are also relevant to two divergent modes of literary expression. Tate thus coordinates two planes of analysis, one more generally cultural, and the other literary.

Early in his career, Tate was critical of Southern culture and its literary tradition. The South was for the young Tate a region devoid of a viable intellectual and artistic tradition. Thomas Underwood describes Tate’s attitude in this way: “[t]he few people who read books in the Old South, [Tate] explained, were, like his own mother, devoted fans of a mawkish literary tradition that began with Walter Scott and ended in the “shallow” books of Thomas Nelson Page...” (113).

At the same time, when he was associated with the Fugitives group in Nashville, Tate began the project of formulating a discourse to elevate the cultural status of the South and defend it from what he saw as the meddling and condescension of the North.

Tate ultimately decided that these exterior forces were more harmful than any of the South's inherent inferiorities. Two crucial sets of events in the mid 1920s—one public, one biographical—spurred Tate to take up this defensive project in earnest. The first was the Scopes “Monkey” Trial, and the second, Tate’s visits to New York City. Based on his outrage at the denigrating image of the South that Northern journalists like H. L. Mencken constructed in their coverage of the Scopes trial and the disillusionment Tate felt as he tried to live the literary life in New York, the author cemented in his mind a rigid view of the North as spiritless, egotistical, and obsessed to the point of fanaticism with science.<sup>2</sup>

In March 1927, he proclaimed to Donald Davidson, “I’ve attacked the South for the last time” (Fain and Young 191), marking a moment of decisive transition from analyzing the deficiencies of Southern culture to defending the region against all attacks. Though he was critical of the naive fantasies of the Old South, he became so disgusted with the North’s industrialism and its effect on culture that he was compelled to revisit those fantasies and find a way to make them viable as a model for the present. As John L. Stewart asserts,

Before long he had performed the ritual act of repudiating his region and its heritage in his essay “Last Days of the Charming Lady” [published in *The Nation* in October, 1925] ... Yet at the very moment of its publication he was discovering how indispensable they were to him ... Raised in a restricting environment among much talk of past and vanished glories he craved liberty and modernity, but once he had them, they ravaged his sensibility. (319)

The “liberty and modernity” of the Northern city were not liberating for Tate, but rather presented him with a number of distressing realities. He felt that city-dwellers, surrounded by the distractions and constant demands of technological life, eked out an existence balanced on the precarious precipice of the moment. Modes of communication and transportation compressed time, and a proper human sense of temporality suffered. As a result, people lost all sense of history, which for Tate was particularly tragic, because historical discourse was for him an essential epistemological tool. The loss of history became for Tate the loss of a meaningful perspective on the dilemmas of the present.

Just as it decries the absence of historical discourse in the construction of an American modernity, Tate’s critical and creative work mourns the decline of the Sacred as a viable concept in modern discourse. Technology threatens not only to compress time into the illusion of a self-contained present, but also to displace the Sacred as source of intellectual structure, emotional fulfillment and social organization. The poem “The Subway” (1927) illustrates not only Tate’s concern with the effect of technology on the time-sense, but also with the way in which it threatens to become the new religion.

Tate portrays the subway as a terrifying hell of human making. The vitriolic tone of the poem arises from a calibrated rhetorical violence: the technological world has usurped the imagery of the church as the structure of the tunnel metaphorically takes on the architecture of a cathedral (1-2). This imposition perverts the connotations of the sacred imagery, creating unsettling paradoxes like “angry worship” (6). The speaker makes it clear that technology’s promise to uplift humanity has proved fraudulent, and instead has sent it hurtling toward “the iron forestries of hell” (8) an image that also

registers technology's displacement of nature. This opposition between a sacred tradition and a profane, ahistorical modernity re-emerges in Tate's prose as a central duality, as we will see.

In the second stanza, the speaker registers the violence of technology personally, implicating it in the fracturing of an integral human vision of the universe:

I am become geometries, and glut

Expansions like a blind astronomer

Dazed, while the worldless heavens bulge and reel

In the cold revery of an idiot. (11-14)

Again, technology imposes itself on another reality, altering it profoundly. In this case, the human identity itself is restructured according to mathematical principles, and human perception of the universe is made diffuse by the imposition of the science of astronomy on the human perception of the universe. What is absent in this imposition of the scientific upon human perception is a sense of proportion, balance and centeredness. "Worlds," or spheres of existence imaginable on a human scale, are lost in the "expansions" that technological innovations, in concert with the disciplines of science, impose on an organic view of the human place in the cosmos.<sup>3</sup>

The result is "the cold revery of an idiot." In this phrase, Tate not only attacks the value of scientific knowledge, but also equates it with idle dreaming ("revery"). The human subject, when thrust into an alien technological space, is left "[d]azed," implying a precipitous suspension of awareness. These assertions of the psychological effects of the experience of technology undercut the solidity of science's claims to dominance over the contested territory of "common sense," implying instead that scientific thinking is an



abstraction from daily experience. This imagery resists the hegemony enjoyed by the scientific viewpoint in a technological culture, and contributes to an overarching contestatory strategy that Tate employs in his prose polemics, as the case of the “New Provincialism” will illustrate.

### **The Inscrutable Demons of History: “Ode to the Confederate Dead”**

History is a central concept in Tate’s work, a force that promises centeredness and connectedness to the past and subsequently provides a means of making the present moment meaningful. Though his prose asserts these values forcefully, it is important to understand that the same values are questioned in Tate’s poetry. In “Ode to the Confederate Dead” (1927), Tate’s most famous poem, the speaker stands as a positive example of Tate’s own ideology in his deep concern with the past, though his experiences in facing that past are terrifying and disheartening.<sup>4</sup> The speaker of the poem can be read as a historian engaging the difficulties of historiography. This speaker reaches toward some kind of connection with the past, but finds little to hold on to, beyond an image of his own mortality. History and death are closely linked in the poem; the speaker highlights the simple fact that probing the past means pondering the lives of the dead. In his imaginative gaze upon the past, he is ultimately unable to find a sense of meaning to validate his existence in the present.

Tate’s own explanation for this failure, as asserted in “Narcissus as Narcissus,” his own reading of the poem, is the solipsism of a “modern man” who illustrates “...the failure of the human personality to function objectively in nature and society” (Essays 595-96). Tate locates the origins of this solipsism in part in a technologized culture. As

we have seen, Tate is profoundly preoccupied with the effects of technology on human perception and cognition. Further illustrating the epistemological importance of history for Tate, the objective reality from which the thinking subject of the poem is isolated is not just spatial, but also temporal. Solipsism is dramatized in its intensest form in Tate's poetry and prose as an ignorance of history.

Driven by conflicting impulses, the "Ode" simultaneously evokes the problematics of loss in linear time and opens a subjective space for the construction of new, epistemologically solid historical discourses built on assertions of temporal continuities. The natural images of the poem signify mindless deterioration. The wind blowing the leaves into "riven troughs" (4) and the rain "Staining the uncomfortable angels that rot/ On the slabs, a wing chipped here, an arm there..." (17-18) enact the slow and irreversible processes of decay and erosion.

Despite this deterioration, the past is accessible through the imagination; the cemetery is not the site of a temporal barrier. Nonetheless, the calling forth of the historical image simultaneously calls forth problematics, as historical figures become fearful specters:

Turn your eyes to the immoderate past,  
Turn to the inscrutable infantry rising  
Demons out of the earth—they will not last.  
Stonewall, Stonewall, and the sunken fields of hemp,  
Shiloh, Antietam, Malvern Hill, Bull Run.  
Lost in that orient of the thick-and-fast  
You will curse the setting sun. (21)

The past is “immoderate”; it overflows with the lives and deeds of the dead, overwhelming the individual surveying it from the present. The immense body of raw data available to the speaker overwhelms the intellectual structures he might use to make sense of it. Further, the imagery that history offers up to the imagination is not only marked by excess, but also by inscrutability.

The speaker’s diction betrays his doubts about the historiographical precepts of stability and conceptual clarity. The human imagination in a sense “surrenders” to the “element” (the wind, an image of passing time and its disruptions), like the gravestones and monuments of the poem’s setting. Still, in contrast to the slow, steady and mindless erosion suggested by the natural imagery, the imagination express a willful rebellion against the inevitability of decay, reanimating, if only for a fearful moment, the figures of the past. After the images fade, the willful imagination “curse[s] the setting sun” that blurs them from sight.

Not only does the speaker betray an awareness of the past’s weight bearing down on the present, but he extends his meditation to the issue of the individual’s proper response to that awareness. In an implied question about the role of creative expression in relation to history and its stark reminders of human mortality, the speaker asks:

What shall we say who have knowledge  
Carried to the heart? Shall we take the act  
To the grave? Shall we, more hopeful, set up the grave  
In the house? The ravenous grave? (22)

Just as the poem problematizes the epistemological foundations of history, it raises unanswered questions about the effect that the contemplation of the past has upon the

individual, and how he or she should respond. The questions that draw the poem to a close ask what kind of message one should formulate from knowledge of the past (“What shall we say...”)—whether we should keep the experience to ourselves, internalizing it and allowing it to transform us from within (“...take the act/ To the grave”) or place it “in the house” for the sake of the instruction of others. The phrase, “The ravenous grave?,” a fragment and a distilled questioning of this notion of the display of knowledge, suggests that the kind of wisdom about mortality that the contemplation of history necessitates and fosters ultimately threatens to destroy life, or more literally, to “ravenous[ly]” consume it. This thorough questioning, not only of the epistemological foundations of historiography, but further, of the relevance of historical discourse to other modes of meaning-making, run in a forceful countercurrent to the certainty with which Tate’s essays deploy historical narrative.

The poem as a whole stages what Michel de Certeau would call “the return of the repressed” within a historical discourse. In this “return,” what the discourse “...holds to be irrelevant—shards created by the selection of materials, remainders left aside by an explication—comes back, despite everything, on the edges of discourse or in its rifts and crannies: ‘resistances,’ ‘survivals,’ or delays discreetly perturb the pretty order of a line of ‘progress’ or a system of interpretation” (Writing 4). What de Certeau calls “the real” (*le réel*) lies outside of discourse, constituting its radical Other, on which the discourse nonetheless bases its existence. This “real” is not totally accessible; a fraction of it is available to the historiographer as an enormous data stream flowing through textual, visual and verbal archives. This totality, together with what is absent from it—materials

inevitably “washed away” by time—constitute “...the unknown immensity that seduces and menaces our knowledge” (3).

What cannot be made intelligible in this immensity, the historiographer must repress. What de Certeau describes (and Tate’s poem dramatizes) is the disruptive resurgence of what the discourse has rendered irrelevant. In both de Certeau’s thinking and in Tate’s poem, it is death itself, along with the physicality of the human body that disrupts a historical discourse with which it has always sustained a problematic relationship. On the one hand, Western historical discourse posits death as a necessary boundary between the formulator of discourse and the object thereof. This discourse rejects non-Western assertions of the cohabitation of the living and the dead: “[o]n its own account, historiography takes for granted the fact that it has become impossible to believe in this presence of the dead that has organized (or organizes) the experience of entire civilizations... (5) Yet on the other, the dead are not abandoned. Though radically Other, they return in discourse, transmuted by an epistemology:

Historiography tends to prove that the site of its production can encompass the past: it is an odd procedure that posits death, a breakage everywhere reiterated in its discourse, and that yet denies loss by appropriating to the present the privilege of recapitulating the past as a form of knowledge. A labor of death and against death. (5)

Tate stages the return of the repressed in a cemetery, a symbolic nexus of tension between these two relationships to death in historical discourse. The cemetery is in one sense the site of the discourse’s “encompassing” of the dead—inscribing into stone names, dates, rhetorical crystallizations of the complexity of long lives, or pious

declarations of life's ultimate continuity. It is also haunted by an absence, by the invisible persistence of what is unintelligible to that discourse: the reality of death and irreversible time. The image of the inscriptions on the gravestones gradually wearing away provides an initial encapsulation of this tension between discourse and death: "Row after row with strict impunity/ The headstones yield their names to the element" (lines 1-2).

### **Calming the Dead: History in Tate's Essays**

Tate's most important poem questions the possibility of implementing history's meaning-making power in the context of the present, and provides no clear outline or guide for expressing and communicating those meanings to others. In his essays, Tate employs much more forceful and didactic rhetorical strategies to prescribe the proper role of the writer in relation to the narratives of history and to the concrete experiences of the present. In "Ode to the Confederate Dead," the speaker makes explicit his uncertainty. Nonetheless, the dilemmas and contradictions that inevitably arise from the process of formulating a set of interrelating philosophical and aesthetic credos get pulled under the forceful polemical current of his essays. On the one hand, the "Ode" dramatizes the threatening emergence of raw, inassimilable historical data into a meditative historical discourse. On the other, Tate's prose tends to construct historical supports for itself that exemplify de Certeau's description of the heterology—a discourse on a spatial and temporal Other that "...aims at hiding the alterity of this foreigner; or, in what amounts to the same thing, it aims at calming the dead who still haunt the present, and at offering them scriptural tombs" (History 2).

Tate struggles with the “demons” of Southern history throughout his career, and at times is successful in pacifying them and deploying them as emblematic figures in his attempts to defend a personal vision of history. His biography of Stonewall Jackson (1928) represents a successful deployment of a complex historical figure as paragon of the virtues of Southern culture. He thus turns Stonewall into a discursive figure that helps sustain his cultural agenda. Tate himself acknowledges that the biography originated in the “Ode,” the first version of which he had completed in late 1926, just before beginning his research on Jackson (Underwood 123, 133). Tate salvages the Confederate general from the “sunken fields of hemp” and inscribes him more confidently into history and into the text of the author’s own personal cultural politics. In a review of the Jackson biography, Steve Davis notes how the Jackson of the biography is a revision of the ghostly figure in the poem (248-49).

In Tate’s literary and cultural critiques, as in his biography of the Confederate general, it seems at times that the author’s prose voice is driven to compensate for the fearful uncertainty of his “Ode.” Reading his essays with an awareness of the philosophical problems raised in his poetry helps us to understand the sources of Tate’s typically strident, forceful, and often arrogant prose voice. We can also understand more thoroughly what undergirds the often inflexible structures of his arguments. As Certeau reminds us, what we call historical discourses “...are historical because they are bound to operations and are defined by functions. Thus we cannot understand what they say independently of the practice from which they result” (Writing 20). The assertions about history that provide such an important support for Tate’s prose polemics are the result of a basic repertoire of practices, organized around the central function of contesting the

economic, political and cultural hegemony of the North's industrial capitalism. What Tate "says" about Southern history is visibly marred by the traces of numerous "repressions" (the most obvious and widely commented of these are his equivocations on the question of chattel slavery). These traces map out Tate's cultural agendas at the moment of inscription. As Certeau succinctly asserts, "...any reading of the past—however much it is controlled by the analysis of documents—is driven by a reading of current events" (23). As we will see, these "current events" consist of the gathering force of a hegemony deployed to reinforce industrial capitalism, events to which Tate is a keen and profoundly partial observer, as we will see in "The New Provincialism."

There is a shift in method, in addition to the obvious difference of philosophical assertion, between Tate's poetry and his prose. While the former engages the problem of modernity through a particular use of archetypal religious, poetic and historical images, a materialist method undergirds the cultural critiques of his essays. Further, the poems tend to locate the ravages of industrial culture in individual subjectivity—the time-sense, the emotional necessity of a meaningful past—while the essays introduce the question of industrial capitalism's systemic effects on the means and distribution of cultural production. Subjective and structural issues are of course linked for Tate as they both have a deleterious effect on the production and reception of literature. Literature is always the central example in overarching critiques of economic systems' effect on culture, and the threatened position of the writer in his society is an issue that is both close to Tate's personal experience and emblematic of broader cultural deterioration in his imaginary.



In “The Profession of Letters in the South” (1935), Tate warns that writing as a profession has been profoundly degraded by its dependence upon market capitalism. As Mark Jancovich points out, the essay engages a concern at the forefront of Tate’s writing throughout his career, namely that “the modern writer lacked a social basis for aesthetic independence” (45). Tate laments that

[t]he American public sees the writer as a business man because it cannot see any other kind of man, and respects him according to his income. And, alas, most writers themselves respect chiefly and fear only their competitors’ sales. A big sale is a “success.” How could it be otherwise? ... This racket, our society being what it is, is a purely economic process, and literary opinion is necessarily manufactured for its needs. Its prime need is shoddy goods, because it must have a big, quick turnover. (Essays 517-18)

Tate addresses the central concern of the relative health of cultural production in the South by describing an issue of economic relations in rather concrete terms.

This concreteness is a salient feature of nearly all of Tate’s prose polemics, and reading them as a whole, it is impossible to ignore Tate’s condemnation of market capitalism. Tate concurs with his Marxist counterparts on the basic problem, though his proposed solutions to the problem are infamously conservative. In “Profession,” Tate criticizes Marxists for confusing monarchy with aristocracy, asserting that the latter is a historical social category of significant value not only to the flourishing of the arts, but also to the stability of society at large (527). Ultimately, Tate replaces the concept of aristocracy with feudalism, to encapsulate a broader notion of the socioeconomic structures he believes are most supportive of valuable cultural production: “Under

feudalism the artist was a member of an organic society ... The total loss of professionalism in letters may be seen in our age—an age that remembers the extinction of aristocracy and witnesses the triumph of a more inimical plutocratic society” (519). The crisis Tate describes is essentially a crisis of patronage, and a hopeful gaze is subsequently cast toward an idealized image of historical European societies where patronage supposedly did its job without contaminating the substance of art.

### **“The New Provincialism”: A Critique of Globalism and a Defense of Regionalism**

An understanding of the dynamics of nostalgia and repression that characterize most of Tate’s prose production is helpful for our analysis of “The New Provincialism.” The essay was written for the twentieth anniversary of *Virginia Quarterly Review* in the spring of 1945. “The Profession of Letters in the South” had appeared in the tenth anniversary number of the same journal, and the author makes explicit reference to this antecedent and proposes to re-examine its central issues in light of the contemporary literary, cultural and political scene. Tate asserts that the earlier essay “...was possibly a little stuffy and more certain of itself than these notes can be” (262). Tate’s admission is deceptive. The 1945 essay sustains the same tone total self-confidence in the unfolding of its cultural polemics that one finds in all of Tate’s previous essays. The moment of slight concession to ambiguity at the outset of the essay is clearly a rhetorical technique gauged to draw down the reader’s defenses. It is not a truthful statement of method.

In “Provincialism,” Tate synthesizes a number of his concerns into a succinct formulation of what he believes are the two core values of literature: regional consciousness and an awareness of tradition. These values occupy different conceptual

planes—the first spatial, and the second, temporal. At the intersection of the two, literature’s proper location is specified. This conceptual dyad takes on a neat symmetry of opposite functions that work together to promote the author’s vision of the proper place of literature in society.

On the spatial plane, Tate asserts that literary art should work within highly restrictive coordinates, in contrast to the cultural globalism emerging in the U.S. in the mid-1940s. As opposed to this globalism’s expanding frame of cultural reference, driven by technological innovations in the media of communication, Tate prescribes a constriction of the cultural space relevant to literary production. He defines this constricted space as “regional,” but is careful to warn early in his essay that he is not espousing what he sees as the typical incarnation of literary regionalism in the U.S., one that is subservient to the expression of a national identity and value system: “...mere regionalism, as we have heard it talked about in recent years, is not enough. For this picturesque regionalism of local color is a by-product of nationalism. And it is not informed enough to support a mature literature” (263). Tate rejects picturesque realism because in it one finds the local reality seen at a distance, from a point of view that stands above and away from that reality. It is not a literature that grounds imagination in experience, as is prescribed in the earlier essay. As a result of its distance and difference from what it describes, nationalistic realism can never be sufficiently “informed”; it can never have access to the kind of detailed knowledge of a culture that is necessary to the production of a literature of the highest quality.

In contrast to “picturesque regionalism,” Tate prescribes a more spatially (and culturally) restricted vision, one that ignores the possible national relevance of an

expression of local experiences, and instead strives toward a more self-contained form of cultural expression. What is implied in Tate's argument is that regionalism derives its effectiveness, as a literary model, from a process of exclusion. It is able to communicate messages of substance and importance because it avoids the dilution of the pool of relevant cultural information that is characteristic of what he calls the provincial attitude. This provincial attitude derives a false sense of its own value from the breadth of its interests. Regionalism deals with a more limited repertoire of cultural experiences, and thus can delve more profoundly into them, whereas the provincial view is so fascinated with communication among disparate cultures that it is distracted from the demanding task of formulating a substantive message to communicate. As Tate emphatically asserts, "...the real end is not physical communication, or parochial neighborliness on a world scale. The real end, as I see it, is *what* you are communicating after you get the physical means of communication" (264). The connection between technology and the provincial attitude in Tate's argument is a manifestation of his constant suspicion of science and its effects on human perception and communication.

According to Tate, the provincial approach to placing literary expression in a relevant cultural grid is flawed, not only because it loses cultural or regional perspective in its constant outward expansion, but also because it is necessarily ahistorical. It limits itself as its outward expansion pushes history out of the frame of reference. Because the provincial view cannot draw restrictive boundaries around cultural space, it is unable to bring to bear a set of temporal narratives that might locate that space in a line of chronological development. Dazzled by the near-infinite variety of images available in the present, it exists in a blissful ignorance of the past: "...no literature can be mature

without the regional consciousness; it can only be senile, with the renewed immaturity of senility” (263).

While geographical and cultural spaces are restricted in Tate’s configuration of the true object of literature, the temporal plane is broadened. Presupposing the reduction of the cultural sphere of relevance to the regional, the temporal frame of reference can be safely expanded. Once the writer has isolated a small subset of cultural realities, he or she can examine how those realities have evolved over time. Though his poetry perpetually struggles with the epistemological dilemmas of historical contemplation, the argumentative stance of essays like “The New Provincialism” suppresses those kinds of problematics, elevating and reifying history as a source of value and meaning.

In his essays, this process of idealization of history is encapsulated in his arguments on behalf of tradition. For Tate, tradition grounds an entire repertoire of approved cultural practices, and the socio-political structures that regulate them, in a teleological structure. The practices and institutions that Tate believes the regional writer must describe are inherently imbued with the positive quality of wisdom, which is the development of forms of knowledge that help the individual tackle the problems of the present. The repertoire of behaviors, attitudes and strategies Tate seeks to uphold, grounded in a particular fantasy about an agrarian way of life, does not just display itself for scrutiny in the present, but rather reveals itself to be the product of a deliberate and progressive evolution over time. When the line of development is not visible from the present moment, Tate himself, his poetic speakers or his fictional characters express or unintentionally betray an acute sense of longing for the lost wisdom of the past. Further,

they seek through various discursive means to repair the breach in time that leaves them without that wisdom's benefit.

Though we have presented the planes on which Tate's definition of the proper functions of literature operate as spatial and temporal, these planes clearly are not pure scientific concepts. In his writing, physical space and temporal progression are both cultural concepts, rather than technical ones, and Tate's advocacy of these particular cultural concepts is rife with problematic political implications. The culture that Tate asserts as essential to the South, which is for Tate the emblematic literary region, is founded on a particular and highly personal fantasy of gentility, harmony, stability and connection to the land. It is up to the reader, though, to question the ideological assumptions lurking behind the writer's active process of selecting both local and historical detail.

Southern literature, for Tate, should be regionalist, according to the definition provided in "The New Provincialism." As he presents this project to the reader, the spatial boundaries of the South are easily drawn, and, more importantly, the history of that South is presented as an absolute reality beyond debate. As many critics have pointed out, the historical South that Allen Tate presents is shaped by numerous fictions and fantasies. Because he sees the regional reality that is so important to his thinking as under attack from economic and cultural incursions from the North, he reifies, then subsequently defends, what he sees as the numerous virtues of the Southern heritage. It takes little historical expertise to perceive the way in which Tate simplifies the real conflicts and tragedies of the South's history in his work. The desperate attempts Tate makes in his writing to defend the social structures of the South are tightly bound to the

development of ideas on the proper function of literature in society. The dialectic of industrial North and agrarian South that Tate constructs to defend the originality and validity of the South as cultural space can be seen ultimately as an anti-imperialist discursive strategy. This strategy is marked by notions of what lies inside and outside the cultural boundaries and the pressure to define in absolute terms the essence of a complex grouping of cultural realities in order to more easily protect it from the perceived threat of the North.

In this discourse, the concept of positivism functions as a coded distillation of the threat the industrialized North poses to the integrity of the agrarian South. The notion that Truth can be discovered through empirical observation is anathema to Tate in the most immediate sense because he associates such a perspective with the North's fixation on science and technology. But Tate's critique is not so much directed at the epistemological bases of scientific methods as it is a response to a set of perceived ills brought on by the technologization of culture, a process being forced upon the South through an imperialist scheme. Positivism, in this sense, stands less as a precise designation of an intellectual system and more as a cipher for the negative social consequences of industrialism.

For Tate, technological refinements promise to furnish the means toward positive ends, but fail to deliver. As we have seen, Tate shows a particular interest in modes of communication. Prefiguring our current-day questions about the deeper effects of "instant" communication, he faults those obsessed with the means of communication for not concerning themselves adequately with the question of what those means might help

us say: “The ease of modern communication compelled these gentlemen to communicate with the world, when there was nothing to communicate” (268).

Looking beyond his critique of industrialism’s damage to the North, it is fascinating to see how Tate locates a great deal of science and technology’s threat in how it is exported. It is crucial to recognize that Tate’s vituperative discourses on the evils of industrialism are driven by the perception of an imperialistic threat. What he finds so disturbing about industrialism is not what it does within its own established sphere, but rather how its negative effects are extended through imperial projects to territories that were previously governed by the noble wisdom of local tradition. Both regional autochthony and temporal continuity are broken down when industrialization is exported, as ways of life that have proven successful over the course of generations are altered to conform to the new rhythms of the machine.

It is important to observe not only Tate’s distaste for the industrial model in its concrete form, but also his deep suspicion of the kinds of discourses he sees emerging from the mechanization of culture. Internationalism, or what Tate calls provincialism, is one set of discourses that he sees as masking an industrial culture’s ulterior motives of conquest. Their deployment in global politics constitutes what Tate succinctly characterizes as “*rules of plunder which look like cooperation*” (267). This phrase strikingly illustrates the antihegemonic mode of Tate’s discourse, as it undercuts the concept of “cooperation” with what he asserts as its true nature.

As an example of industrial culture’s hegemonic posturing, Tate cites Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” speech, a text that was intended both as a statement of the United States’ responsibility to preserve international justice and as a refutation of



strategies of appeasement proposed by isolationists opposed to U.S. involvement in World War II.<sup>5</sup> Tate deconstructs Roosevelt's text in the essay, pouring derision upon what he sees as the deception built into the text's rhetoric and parodying the good-hearted intentions it attempts to illustrate:

We guarantee to the world freedom from want. We had better—or somebody had better guarantee it, even if the guarantee is no good; for nineteenth-century industrial capitalism and our own more advanced technology have made it very difficult for “backward peoples” (to say nothing of ourselves in small units and groups) to make their living independently of somebody else nine thousand miles away. In other words we have destroyed the regional economies, and we offer a provincial remedy which ignores our past experience. (268)

Industrialization is not just a blight on the populations who work in its factories; Tate is quite clear in asserting that the misery and subjugation it facilitates spreads itself around the world through networks of economic and political influence. His placement of the phrase “backwards peoples” in quotation marks illustrates the deconstructive tenor of his argument. He launches an attack not just on the economic subjugation of foreign peoples but also on the conceptual and real violence done to other cultures through the Eurocentric political and academic rhetoric that characterizes the Other as an inferior element in a comparison with the Western self. His argument sounds surprisingly contemporary, in its anticipation of the kind of deconstructive techniques of present-day cultural criticism.

Of course, the moral foundation of Tate's critique is shaky, especially as the author indiscriminately dismisses Roosevelt's Four Freedoms proposal. The wholesale

rejection of industrialization carries with it a disdain for the humanitarian goals toward which industrialized countries like the U.S. at times try to employ their technologies:

Nobody wants to see the Oriental peoples dominated by the Japanese and to go hungry and ill clad; yet so far in the history of civilization it has been virtually impossible to feed and clothe people with food and clothing. It is my own impression that they get fed and clothed incidentally to some other impulse, a creative power which we sometimes identify with religion and the arts. (540)

The purity of the U.S. government's intents to protect human rights "everywhere in the world," as Roosevelt states in his speech, can be questioned. But Tate's critique does not distinguish between false motives and any possible benefits. Instead, it rejects the importance of "feeding and clothing" people in distant parts of the world, asserting instead the notion that religious beliefs and artistic impulses somehow are responsible for the accidental, or "incidental" carrying out of these purposes. Tate fails to clarify exactly how this process might work, and provides no sustained development of an alternative model of international justice, for the obvious reason that his discourse against industrialism has reached a feverish extreme, past which no articulate case can be made.

At this point in Tate's argument, the reader is reminded of the revered core of values that helps the author oppose what he sees as the crass utilitarianism of the North. Those values take the shape of religion and art, realms of human activity that he advocates more articulately and more credibly in other contexts. In the rhetorical tangle of "The New Provincialism," though, they are clumsily drawn into service in the debunking of Northern industrialism.

Though Tate is interested in asserting that a particular kind of religiosity is essential to the Southern character, the concept of religion in the essay is limited to an oppositional role in relation to the Northern positivism and pragmatism that Tate seeks to deconstruct. The essay's defense of Southern culture does not emerge from a thoroughgoing description of the role of the Sacred in Southern culture, but rather draws religion into service in the fight against an opposing ideology. According to Tate, religion is important to Southern regionalism largely because it helps the individual avoid falling prey to a superficial and short-sighted practicality. Because of his religion, the Southerner can "evade total efficiency" (266) as well as the "barbarism" (265) that results from the unchecked indulgence of pragmatism. The content of the Southerner's religiosity is not the crucial question. The way religious feeling makes people behave is what Tate finds most important. Religion, hand in hand with Tradition, underwrites a repertoire of behaviors that Tate does not defend for their inherent value, but rather for the way in which they resist the encroaching influence of Northern culture. This distinction becomes quite important when we place Tate's essay in the context of the religious foundations of *Orígenes*, as we will see later.

Tate's approach to religion contrasts with the orientation of his wife, the novelist Caroline Gordon, whose essay "Some Readings and Misreadings," was translated by Rodríguez Feo and published in *Orígenes* in 1954.<sup>6</sup> Gordon's essay seeks to prove the hypothesis that all novels written in the West are inevitably informed by Christianity, whatever the explicit creed of the author:

A novelist's conscious mind may be influenced by what is going on around him, he may announce himself a pragmatist, a skeptic, an atheist while his creative

faculties seem to move in and subscribe to a totally different order ... I believe that it could be shown that in the nineteenth century and in our own century as well the fiction writer's imagination often operates within the pattern of Christian symbolism rather than in the patterns of contemporary thought. (385)

Gordon describes Christian thought as the source, not only of the Southern regional novel, but of all novelistic production in what she vaguely imagines to be the Christian West. In her essay, she outlines the central Christian themes structuring nineteenth- and twentieth-century European and American novels: redemption, charity, sin, damnation, and love. Late in the essay, she arrives at a bold affirmation. The labor of the novelist is akin to the redemptive work of Christ in the world: "It is the fiction writer's arduous task to imitate, on however lowly a scale, the patience that stooped low enough to lift up a fallen universe" (400). Ann Waldron writes that Gordon believed that "...the writer of serious fiction had the same goal as the contemplative and the mystic. He needed the patience of Christ" (259).

If for Gordon, writing in the early fifties, religiosity precedes and produces literary expression, Tate's 1945 essay makes sociology and history the muses of fiction. For him, the primary goal of fiction is to reflect the workings of a society. In the case of the South, it just so happens that Christianity is a crucial element in those workings. Though, in an even deeper contrast with Gordon's position, he allows the humanism inherited from ancient Greece a place of equal importance in relation to Christianity in his description of Southern culture. He considers "Christian otherworldliness" (265) a force that takes on importance *through* its counterbalancing relation to humanism and individualism.

## Key Features of Tate's Rhetoric

“The New Provincialism,” in spite of its excesses, proves Tate to be a master polemicist. As we have seen, the essay is sustained by a basic opposition between a clearly established set of dualities. Tate draws on a deep reserve of rhetorical resources to fend off any incursion of ambiguity into his argument. The result is an unequivocal denigration of one pole of a duality (the North, technology, cultural “provincialism”) and advocacy of the other (the South, agrarianism, regionalism). The perlocutionary effect of conceptual clarity is not an end in itself, though, as Tate’s essay is clearly not meant simply to be informative. It is essential to recognize that the purpose of the conceptual consistency Tate achieves is to produce the illocutionary effects of confrontation, provocation, and persuasion. His rhetorical techniques work toward this goal, as well, not simply toward clarity. We can observe these techniques at work at various linguistic and textual levels—semantic, syntactic, and orthographical.

A categorization of his rhetorical techniques and an understanding of their illocutionary force are necessary in order to see if Rodolfo Tro’s translation of the essay for *Orígenes* replicates those techniques and thus seeks illocutionary equivalence. Many of the techniques mentioned will seem obvious. We nonetheless must be attentive to them, as we will no longer take them for granted when we observe the alterations they undergo as they are translated into Spanish.

On a metatextual level, Tate employs a number of literary, political and cultural allusions or references that serve crucial functions. For example, his mention of Bourbon County, Kentucky (263) economically evokes for any American reader a general sense of

cultural marginality, as part of an effort to displace the dominant ideology to a similarly humble position. Tate asserts that the cosmopolitan, internationalist literature of the North "...may be a provincial literature with world horizons, the horizons of the geographical world, which need not be spiritually larger than Bourbon County, Kentucky..." (263). The geographical reference is much more concise than a rhetorical formulation like "an out of the way county" or a hackneyed expression like "one-horse town"; this compression of signification is carefully gauged to explode the comfortable conceptual hierarchies of cosmopolitan culture.

Perhaps the most obvious strength of Tate's rhetoric is semantic. It is easy to compile a list of carefully chosen terms whose meanings are manipulated not simply to express a concept but also to contribute to the illocutionary force of the essay. The clearest example of this is "provincialism." This term not only expresses the sense of a cultural perspective limited to the local and familiar, but further, enacts an antihegemonic deconstruction of the urban North's claims to cultural centrality and superiority. Tate uses the term "provincialism" to describe a Northern culture that sees itself as central and prides itself on its cosmopolitanism, thus inverting the value-laden semantics of center and periphery to contest the imperialist projects of the North.

Further, Tate's syntax (or what we might call, in a less technical sense, his "style") is masterful. One feature that is especially striking is the alternation of longer sentences with carefully arranged multiple clauses and short, forceful single-clause sentences. This alternation balances two effects that might, in other contexts, be in conflict with one another: intellectual sophistication and plainspoken directness. This dual effect arises from a delicate equilibrium of scholarly and demotic speech. This

equilibrium contributes to, and provides a concrete manifestation of, the overall goal of elevating what Tate calls “the regional consciousness” to a position of cultural importance without diminishing the strengths derived from its supposed humility and simplicity.

Finally, we must notice the rhetorical value of the essay’s orthographical features, as mundane as they may seem. To emphasize the semantic value of certain terms and phrases, Tate frequently uses italics. To question the usage of other terms and phrases that the producers of the competing discourse employ, he places them in quotation marks, as in the examples of “national” (263); “universal” (263); “international cooperation” (264) and “backward peoples” (268). At other times, Tate places entire sentences in quotation marks to show that they are being uttered by an imaginary interlocutor that represents the opposing view. The quotation marks inflect the utterances instantly with a deconstructive irony that contributes to Tate’s general polemical strategies. These techniques may seem far from subtle or innovative, though we will appreciate their importance when we examine what happens in their transfer from English to Spanish.

### **Contextualization of “The New Provincialism” in *Orígenes***

Having established the salient features of Tate’s arguments in “The New Provincialism,” it is useful as a next step to examine what happens when those arguments are placed in the context of the political and cultural projects of *Orígenes*. In this examination, we will work from our analysis of the essay in English toward a recontextualization of the essay. This is not the final step of our analysis, though. We must subsequently proceed from an understanding of the conceptual consonances and

dissonances between Tate's text in English and its new Cuban context to an examination of the way in which the translator of the essay negotiates those relationships in order to process the text so that it will possess a coherent function in the target language.

The most immediate difficulty we face when we recontextualize Tate's essay is the inappropriateness of his concept of regionalism to a Cuban magazine that locates its own cultural projects in a national framework.<sup>7</sup> The differences of prescribed methodology between Tate and the *origenistas* are the logical manifestation of contrasting definitions of culture and the reforms necessary to its preservation. Because of his reaction against a cultural imperialism that increasingly asserts itself as a national phenomenon, there is great urgency in Tate's avocation of a local culture that, if properly defined, can mobilize literature as a force of resistance. *Orígenes*, in contrast, eschews all subnational definitions of literature, placing its faith instead in the revitalization of a national literature.<sup>8</sup> This fact obviously stems from the lack of a conflicted regional division within Cuba like the North-South duality that is still so important to Tate. For the *origenistas*, a project of cultural reform must engage all factions and transcend regional, ethnic and class divisions.

Despite the absence of an intra-national divide like the one between North and South in the U.S., Cuba's neo-colonial relationship to the U.S. in the 1940s and 50s is broadly parallel to the divide Tate describes. Tate is clear in asserting that the North's imperialist machinations, once they have dissolved all cultural differences and political dissent within the U.S., will inevitably become U.S. imperialism, and the South will become a participant. Thus, it is possible to read "The New Provincialism" in the context of *Orígenes* with an emphasis, not on the subnational regionalism that Tate espouses, but



rather on the concept of imperialism and the hegemonic discourses imperialism employs. In this reading, Tate's text becomes more deployable in a Cuban context, as a useful warning, from within the belly of the beast, of the gathering imperial force of the U.S. at the end of World War II.

It is clear that the members of the *Orígenes* group operate under an awareness of the same imperialist threat that Tate identifies. The magazine defines its project in part as a response to Cuba's political corruption, gangsterism, and resulting public sense of the futility of participating in a dysfunctional system of government. These forces are impelled in part by the same neo-imperialism Tate critiques in "The New Provincialism." Nonetheless, the *origenista* response to the threat is quite different from Tate's.

Generally, the Cuban magazine's programmatic statements identify cultural and political problems without being as explicit as Tate in diagnosing their origins. In "La otra desintegración," for example, Lezama and Rodríguez Feo sketch a trajectory of democracy's frustration in Cuba from the struggles for independence to the mid-twentieth century (60). This progression is evoked with a rhetorical economy that contrasts with the detailed deconstruction of imperialist ideology in Tate's essay. *Orígenes* takes an oblique and laconic stance on the genealogy of Cuban cultural problems in the context of imperialism, whereas Tate tackles the development of imperialist ideology head-on, employing a mode of analysis that highlights the specificity of its own cultural conditions.

While Tate links the cultural ills of the North to material forces like technology and the media of communication, the creative and critical methodologies of *Orígenes*

envision the root of political and cultural “disintegration” as a lack of imagination. The description of the problem is couched in a poetic rhetoric that suggests poetic solutions:

Cerca del índice crítico que señala la falta de imaginación estatal, que no es en definitiva sino la ausencia de una proyección o impulsión por zonas más espléndidas, es necesario ir ya entregando las formas superadoras de esa desintegración. Si ese señalamiento es esencialmente crítico, su remedio tendrá que brotar de creación y de imagen. (Desintegración, 60)

Near the critical index that points out the State’s lack of imagination, which is clearly nothing less than the absence of a projection or impulsion through more splendid zones, it is necessary to begin to provide the forms that will overcome that disintegration. If that assertion is essentially critical, its remedy will have to emerge from creation and from the image.

Though the editors acknowledge the importance of the “critical index” that quantifies the dilemmas facing Cuban culture, their analysis veers from historiographical and political modes of analysis in order to reformulate the problem in poetic terms. This formulation, designating a lack of “imagination” and “projection,” determines the nature of the proper response: the creation of new images of the nation through art.

This way of imagining the national space is a response to the failure of politically committed writers to work effectively in the traditional spaces of public discourse. Because the *origenistas* believe that public discourse has been so profoundly contaminated by corruption in its various forms, they revise the role of the politically engaged writer that is such an important element of their national tradition, opting instead

to avoid the failures of political engagement by redefining the nation in terms that allow them a more direct role in the process of reform. Thus, the nation, as imagined in *Orígenes*, is a created and creative phenomenon, a spiritual mode of existence that art is especially well-equipped to recuperate and sustain.

In her 1948 essay “La Cuba Secreta,” the Spanish philosopher María Zambrano defines the nation in poetic and religious terms, positing national identity in a way that gives the individual imagination a role in reshaping it. She thus clears the ground for a direct and fundamental intervention in the national process by the kind of literature *Orígenes* promotes. As we have asserted before, this move helps the *origenistas* define their project in such a way that they can avoid a basic dilemma facing politically engaged writers: how to reconcile the individual and creative nature of their work with the collective and purportedly objective nature of the political discourse they are working to transform.

Further, there is a fundamental conflict between the function of religiosity in *Orígenes* and in Tate’s essay. For the majority of the *origenistas*, religious thinking is at the root of their assertions about the nature of literature and its role in society, whereas for Tate, a certain kind of religious mindset is described largely in terms of its utility in resisting a competing agenda. Religiosity does not structure Tate’s literary projects from the ground up as it does the projects of Lezama and Vitier; the regionalism Tate espouses, though it allies itself strategically with religion, relies more on political, historical and sociological concepts to sponsor its agendas, and spirituality is most often a manifestation of these same concepts.

As we have seen, Tate poses humanism in contradistinction to spirituality, asserting that, in Southern culture, one tendency offsets the other. In the opening editorial statement in *Orígenes*, humanism is a concept that operates in a supportive relation to artistic production and to religiosity. Lezama and Rodríguez Feo do not place humanism in tension with Christianity; instead, they see “the humanistic tradition” (6) as the source of an artistic and philosophical freedom that facilitates the Genetic acts of creation that form their heterodox mode of religiosity.

The predominant value system undergirding *Orígenes* as cultural project defines the crisis of the Cuban republic in essentially spiritual terms, and as a result, its proposed solutions must not be limited to the historical-sociological method Tate prescribes for regionalist literature and evidences in his own essay. Although Tate affirms the importance of literature in renewing Southern culture, its role is for him much more restricted. This aspect of his argument runs up against the methodologies of *Orígenes*'s dominant theoretician. Bolstered by assertions of the spiritual nature of artistic creation, the theoretical foundation for *Orígenes* that Lezama establishes in his essays assumes the power of literature to intervene in history in order to transform it, whereas for Tate, the literary text must simply reflect cultural realities and, when necessary, bring to light the weaknesses or contradictions that threaten the integrity of a society. As we have seen in his essay, Tate's literary regionalism emphasizes the importance of cultural information; the kinds of questions the writer must ask herself are: “...what is the structure of Southern society? What *was* it in the eighteen-forties and -fifties?” (271). The role of the writer is to place present realities in the context of a tradition, a line of development that will illuminate its complexities.

Lezama approaches history quite differently, rejecting the notions of linearity and causality that inform Tate's basic view of history and determine the way he brings history to bear on culture and the role of literature. For Lezama, cultures consist of constellations of images. The image itself is a dynamic force, moving fluidly through time, evolving and undergoing constant permutations. Throughout history, artists participate in these processes, shaping images into forms never seen before, which will be taken up and reshaped by future creators. This notion of culture and its development through time facilitates surprisingly fluid connections among creative artifacts from different epochs and cultures. Lezama extols the freedom of the creative genius to supercede simplistic causalities in the offering of his or her imaginative vision (Mitos 15). The activity of Lezama's "sujeto metafórico," a subjectivity that intervenes in history, contrasts sharply with Tate's effort to establish a stable history upon which to found a literary project. Lezama's poetic historiography allows a freer play of signification and approaches images as entities in a state of constant metamorphosis rather than as static markers of a determined set of historical relations.

Thus, Lezama transgresses the essential division between the "real" that is the object of historical discourse and discourse itself, a division Michel de Certeau asserts is central to Western historical discourse. Lezama's poetic discourse, rather than staging the difficulties of historiography, like Tate's "Ode," ignores those difficulties, asserting the right of poetic discourse to constitute and reconstitute the "real" through images. Further, where Certeau sees history replacing myth in modern Western cultures from the sixteenth century on, Lezama deploys mythic materials as a means of rewriting history. For de Certeau, history "...combines what can be thought, the 'thinkable,' and the origin,

in conformity with the way in which a society can understand its own workings” (Writing 21). For Lezama, the image, especially in its participation in the epistemological operations of metaphor, is invested with the power to constantly challenge what is thinkable, and ultimately to return to the question of the origin (of divine Creation *and* human creativity) and enact, in each instance, a fresh encounter.

Despite aforementioned differences of poetic methodology, Lezama’s poetic historiography is more consonant with the role of the speaker of Tate’s poem “Ode to the Confederate Dead” than it is with the epistemological assuredness of Tate’s essays. History appears to the speaker of the “Ode” as a series of *images* he is not sure how to order and make sense of. This, his most famous poem, would have been in this sense a more sympathetic interlocutor with the context of *Orígenes* than “The New Provincialism.” If history is for Lezama an inherently unstable system of signification as a result of its constitution by images in constant processes of transformation and combination, for Tate the prose polemicist, history is an essentially linear, epistemologically stable movement of ascendance or decline, in negation of the more questioning poetic subjectivity at work in the “Ode.” Whereas that poetic voice interrogates the nature and utility of the *images* of the past that emerge in the *imagination*, the prose voice illustrates Tate’s Spenglerian vision, wherein the history of a society is seen as moving through clearly definable stages of development or decadence. Yoking history to tradition in the essay, Tate allows the regionalist author little creative agency; her role is to represent cultural phenomena accurately and to contextualize them historically. Although Tate recognizes the role of the imagination in filling in gaps in historical data in order to construct a living image of human experience in history, the

imaginative freedom of the author is always circumscribed by the investigative and critical nature of her project. This restriction contrasts profoundly with the imaginative reconstitution of history in Lezama's theory of the image.

In spite of these incongruities of approach to the questions of history, religiosity and the role of literature, the anti-imperialist goals and the discursive strategies that uphold them in Tate's essay find a sympathetic interlocutor outside the dominant *origenista* agendas described above, in the textual space the magazine's younger editor opens within the journal. The fact that Rodríguez Feo is responsible for contacting U.S. authors such as Tate and soliciting submissions from them is the first clue that his agenda is to inflect the magazine's dominant project (as largely defined by Lezama) in a particular way. Not only does he facilitate the concrete process of textual transfer, but his critical essays work in tandem with Tate's methodology, providing a sympathetic textual support for the U.S. author's contribution. The concrete historical analysis and explicit political engagement of his criticism not only harmonize with Tate's methods, but also contribute to the *Orígenes* project in a unique way generally ignored by scholars of Cuban literature.

A particularly striking example of these traits is Rodríguez Feo's 1944 essay on George Santayana. The opening statement of the essay echoes Tate's critique of the pragmatism and greed of the industrialized North (though the Cuban author, significantly, attributes these qualities to U.S. culture as a whole). This statement clears a space within *Orígenes* for the discursive operations of Tate's essay:

Para reafirmar los valores espirituales del hombre frente a cualquier momento histórico que exige como realidad salvadora valores prácticos y una moral de

acción justificada por el éxito material, han surgido en los Estados Unidos críticos geniales que han dejado oír su voz en la historia con una claridad terrible. (35)

In order to reaffirm man's spiritual values in the face of a historical moment that demands, as a saving reality, practical values and a morality of action justified by material success, there have emerged in the United States brilliant critics who have let their voice be heard in history with a terrible clarity.

Rodríguez Feo celebrates the role of the cultural critic who elucidates and opposes the forces of moral and spiritual disintegration in a society, a role he identifies in Santayana and simultaneously seeks to exemplify in his own analysis.

The kind of critique that Rodríguez Feo advocates and practices contrasts with the dominant methodology of *Orígenes* we have already discussed; it does not describe cultural problems in poetic and spiritual terms, even though poetic creation and religiosity are still core values. Instead, he is attentive to the material foundations of cultural tendencies. In contrast to the malleable temporality that is implied in Lezama's vision of history as constituted by images, Rodríguez Feo employs a temporally linear conception of cultural evolution.

Following his opening proclamation, Rodríguez Feo moves not to Santayana, but to Emerson, in an effort to reconstruct some of the stages in the evolution of pragmatism, individualism and materialism in U.S. culture. Rodríguez Feo identifies in Emerson's transcendentalism the origins of an important force in this evolution. Emerson's rejection of Calvinism engenders an optimism about humanity's capacity for self-determination and a sense of moral infallibility that fuel the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and is



exploited by captains of industry. The savage capitalism of the early twentieth century thus has clear roots in Emerson's thinking in the 1830s:

Las mismas fuentes de riquezas que parecían inagotables iban siendo controladas por un grupo cada vez más limitado de grandes magnates que invocaban la filosofía emersoniana como justificación de sus hazañas predatorias. Aun hoy la lectura favorita de Henry Ford son las obras de Emerson. (36)

The same sources of wealth that seemed inexhaustible became controlled by an increasingly limited group of large magnates who invoked Emersonian philosophy as justification for their predatory exploits. Even today, Henry Ford's favorite readings are the works of Emerson.

In addition to the linearity of Rodríguez Feo's analysis, we find a more explicitly political critique of U.S. imperialism than is allowed within the dominant agenda of the magazine. Noting that there is a very similar critique of Emerson in Tate's 1928 essay on Emily Dickinson strengthens our impression of a fundamental philosophical and methodological consonance between Tate and Rodríguez Feo.<sup>9</sup> Noting this consonance, it becomes clearer why the Cuban editor would solicit a contribution from a writer whose work on the surface seems so incompatible with the magazine's projects.

The concrete historical and political foundations of both Rodríguez Feo and Tate's critical work contrast with the dominant notions of nationhood and history in *Orígenes*, though perhaps the specificity and force of their critiques of imperialism are not completely at odds with the magazine's generally metaphorical and only obliquely political discourses. Though recontextualizing Tate's essay has underlined a dissonance

within the *Orígenes* project, that dissonance can be perceived as part of a broader harmony. We are led to this consideration by noting the striking duality of Rodríguez Feo himself, who participates in the espousal of both concrete *and* metaphorical modes of cultural critique in *Orígenes*. It is likely that he saw no necessary conflict between the two activities. As we have seen in the passage from “La otra desintegración,” Rodríguez Feo and Lezama note the presence of a “critical index” that supports the project of the creative revitalization of a culture. Rodríguez Feo, both as editor and as critic, works to establish such an index in the magazine, one that supports the resistance of corruption and imperialism from within a clear historiographical and political framework. Thus, it becomes clear that within the magazine’s polyvocality there must be a reconciliation between the diametric poles of historical analysis and explicit political engagement on the one hand, and the shaping of poetic images on the other. The transformative agency of image and metaphor that Lezama celebrates is strengthened when the reader can refer to a clear historical and political “index.”

Lezama’s poetic approach to cultural critique and renovation derives force from its discursive exclusion of techniques found to be too specific and dependent upon immediate context. If more specific political advocacy and historical narrative were deployed within Lezama’s approach to cultural analysis, broadly ranging and flexible metaphors for cultural phenomena would be tied down to limiting definitions. Yet, the presence, within the broader intertextual network of the literary journal, of Rodríguez Feo’s markers of concrete historical and political realities exerts a stabilizing and orienting force on Lezama’s metaphors. Furthermore, it does so without compromising the internal consistency of Lezama’s approach. This delicate balance exemplifies

Rodríguez Feo's and Lezama's assertions of the strength that polyvocality confers upon the journal through the mechanism of intertextuality. Each contributor and each text is permitted an integrity that allows for the development of forcefully personal propositions, while the intertextual relationships within the journal create enriching inflections and recontextualizations.

Taking an approach that is attentive to both the contrasts and the parallels of philosophy and approach in *Orígenes* and within Rodríguez Feo himself, we can more properly assess the complexity of the encounter between Tate's essay and its new context. "The New Provincialism" must be seen working in tandem with Rodríguez Feo's essay on Santayana, as both texts place concrete markers on the imperialist forces threatening Cuban culture within the space of the magazine's more abstract, philosophical and aesthetic projects. This concrete basis strengthens the force of resistance through image-making by providing a firm conceptual support.

### **"El Nuevo Provincialismo": The Reshaping and Appropriation of Tate's Text through Translation**

Having established both the conflicts and the confluences of agenda and methodology between Tate's English text and its Cuban context, it is essential to proceed to the final step of analyzing how the translation of the English text into Spanish negotiates this varied intertextual terrain. The translation of the text must deal with these issues and find a way of making the original speak in a new language and bear relevance to the magazine into which it is incorporated. As André Lefevere asserts, the translator's "ideology" (how she envisions the ideal society) in conjunction with her "poetics" (or

how she views the ideal literary work) inform the process of translation (14). Further, we must see how ideology and poetics work in relation to one another, such that an ideal role for a literary work within a society is envisioned. Rodolfo Tro's association with aspects of the *Orígenes* ideology and poetics informs disruptions that occur in the transfer process and in the less noticeable consonances. Attention to these textual features renders a better understanding of how "The New Provincialism" is redeployed within a new cultural space.

Taken as a whole, the textual refractions that Tro's translations enact do not represent a radical intervention. The basic structure of Tate's argument is fairly well represented in the translation. Nonetheless, Tro's translation attenuates the urgency of Tate's argument, even if it does not radically alter it. As we have established, many of the essay's rhetorical techniques are gauged to produce two basic effects—the clear development of a conceptual opposition and the evocation of a sense of the urgency that one side of that opposition ultimately win out. At a number of moments in the translated text, we see that these effects are not fully reproduced. This process of attenuation occurs on both semantic and mechanical levels. The translation refracts the original to produce an image of the text that is more easily incorporated into the varied cultural projects of *Orígenes*.

There is one significant moment in Tro's translation where the transfer of sense breaks down. It is an important moment in which Tate contests the "provincial" assertion that regionalism is solipsistic and must be opened up to a global commerce of ideas. Tate asserts: "... the logical opposite, or the historic complement, of the isolated community or region is not the world community or world region" (264). The complementary

principle that should be present in order to balance the small-mindedness and combativeness that is latent in regionalism is what Tate calls “a nonpolitical or supra-political culture ... a sufficient unity somewhere at the top, to check the drive of mere interest...” (265). As Tate goes on to explain, the cultural formation that provides this “unity” is not a global mindset such as the competing ideology espouses, but rather “a peculiar balance of Greek culture and Christian other-worldliness” (265). Thus, we observe an illustrative moment in Tate’s overarching project of resisting the imposition of a global mindset on Southern regionalism, a project that a certain concept of religious “other-worldliness” helps achieve.

In Tro’s translation, the sentence that begins “For the logical opposite...” is broken into two sentences that dismantle the sense of the original: “Porque la historia opone o complementa. La comunidad o región aislada, no es comunidad mundial o región mundial” (34) (“Because history opposes or complements. The isolated community is not a world community or a world region”). The effect of this breakdown on the translated text is to check the progress of Tate’s argument at a moment when he is refuting crucial tenets of an opposing ideology. As a result, the translation does not contest the globalizing ideology of “provincialism” with the same thoroughness and systematic progress of the original. Looking at the translation as a whole, we must assert that Tate’s argument does indeed come through, but the moment at which its careful development momentarily breaks down attenuates the argument’s force.

Investigating this same passage in the translation further, we see that the introduction of the concept of “Christian other-worldliness,” to which the sentence about regionalism’s “historic complement” opens the way, is not tied so closely in logical

opposition to the Northern ideology nor employed as effectively in combating that ideology. With the sense of the aforementioned sentence erased, the concept of “other-worldliness” emerges somewhat more abruptly, and stands out on its own as a result. This effect is highly significant, as it represents a moment in which the translation has recast Tate’s argument in terms that pose religiosity in a less utilitarian way. Instead of serving a somewhat strictly delimited function in the opposition of a globalist ideology, that religiosity stands out more prominently from the terrain of the argument as a value in itself, an aspect of Western culture to be celebrated on its own merits.

The fact that Tro translates the term “other-worldliness” as “Piedad” (“Piety”) heightens this effect. Whereas Tate opposes religiosity to “worldliness” or pragmatism, Tro employs a term (“Piety”) that effaces that oppositional relationship. The capitalization of the word further elevates it, moving it above the functional level of its English equivalent. This translational move is similar to Rodríguez Feliú’s treatment of the image of the dove in Stevens’s poem. The translation bears the distinct trace of a religious project that is fundamental to the translator’s politics and poetics. Thus, we observe a significant moment in which an aspect of the original text that conflicts with the ideology of its new context is suppressed and replaced by rhetorical techniques that are more consonant with that ideology.

The development of Tate’s argument is also held in check and its illocutionary force reduced on a grammatical level. Another early passage in which Tate establishes a conceptual support for his defense of regionalism serves as a good example. After mentioning a few authors who represent examples of literary nationalism—Van Wyck Brooks, Alfred Kazin, and Bernard De Voto—Tate asserts quite forcefully that the

influence of these authors "...is no longer very much felt by anybody who seriously writes..." The explanation for this criticism is the assertion that a national literature has not yet existed in the United States: "...it is sufficient here merely to state the paradox that not even literary nationalism could abort a genuine national literature when it is ready to appear; when, in fact, we become a nation. But it is more likely that we may become an international first" (262-63). An attack on the aforementioned writers serves as a lead-in for Tate to refute not only "literary nationalism," but more profoundly, the very notion that the United States is one nation. He thus asserts the priority of regional divisions over any notion of a unified national culture, a move that helps clear the way for his development of regionalism as a literary, cultural and political value system, as we have seen.

In Tro's translation, the subjunctive mood that sustains the concept of the inexistence of a national culture in the original is discarded in favor of the indicative:

...nos parece suficiente hacer presente la paradoja, que ni aún el nacionalismo literario *puede* hacer abortar una literatura nacional legítima, cuando *está* preparada a aparecer, cuando, de hecho, *hemos* llegado a convertirnos en una nación. Pero es mucho más lógico, que nos convirtamos primero en una internación. (32) [emphasis mine]

...it seems sufficient to us to make present the paradox that not even literary nationalism *can* abort a legitimate national literature, when it *is* prepared to appear, when, in fact, *we have* become a nation. But it is much more logical that we would convert ourselves first into an international.

Employing the indicative in the verbs “puede,” “está” and “hemos,” Tro obscures the negation that underlies Tate’s argument. The use of the subjunctive in each of these cases would underline the fact that the national literature and culture do not exist at the moment of the utterance, projecting the possibility of its existence into an uncertain future. The stance of the translation is more neutral with respect to the existence or inexistence of a national literature or culture, and the translated text thus refutes nationalism less forcefully. The result of this effect is to establish a less solid foundation for the espousal of regionalism in the passages that follow. Again, the force of Tate’s essay is attenuated, in this case, on a grammatical level.

Though Tro’s translation gives the reader a sense of the specific cultural and historical allusions by which Tate strengthens his argument, many of the original’s references are rendered incorrectly. The result is a blurring of the concrete nature of Tate’s discourse. This effect on the original is consonant with the dominant method of cultural commentary in *Orígenes*, where excessive specificity is avoided in order to develop arguments of much broader cultural and historical relevance. The misspelling of “Bourbon County” as “el Condado de Bourhorn” (33) is one example of this blurring.

Though it is clear that a conflict with the *Orígenes* methodology is a factor in this blurring, it also illustrates an essential problem with the “translation” of proper nouns in general. The error calls attention to a fundamental fact of any translation: that the meanings of many concrete cultural references are not fully transferable to another cultural context. As Susan Bassnett-McGuire reminds us, in a paraphrase of Georges Mounin, translation is “...a series of operations of which the starting point and the end product are *significations* and function within a given culture” (15). Even if the



geographical term is spelled correctly, its significance cannot be replicated in a foreign cultural context.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the error underscores an inevitable effect *any* translation would have on Tate's discourse: the cultural specificity with which he advances his argument must necessarily recede toward the background in a translation. Conceptual supports for his argument that are less dependent on shared cultural understandings will be more likely to survive the transfer process.

Finally, the processes we have touched on so far are at work even at a typographical level. Though Tate's use of italics for emphasis at various points in the text hardly stands out to the reader as a particularly salient feature of his rhetoric, the absence of those italics in the translation calls attention to their effect in the original. The italics mark concepts or logical connections that are of special importance to Tate's argument. Often, they highlight a contrast between regionalism and provincialism in a way that crystallizes the sense of an unequal opposition between the two ideologies. In the case of Tate's discussion of provincialism's reliance on the technological means of communication and the acceleration in the processes of human communication, he offers the regionalist counterpoint, wherein the content of messages is considered above the speed with which they can be delivered: "The real end, as I see it, is *what* you are communicating after you get the physical means of communication" (264). This emphasized "what" establishes an opposition to an unstated "how," resulting in a succinct polarity that presents the reader with a forceful contrast between provincialism and regionalism. In the translation, the emphasis on "what" is absent, and subsequently, the way in which that word stands out as a particularly effective rhetorical concentration of an opposition is not reproduced in the translation. The concept of the opposition between

speed and content of communication is still carried over into the translation, but the emphasis on the latter, as well as its use as a cipher or signpost of a whole constellation of oppositions between provincialism and regionalism, is lost.

The ways in which Tro's translation refracts the original text determine how the translation is designed to work in the context of *Orígenes*. The moments where the progression of Tate's argument is interrupted and his emphatic tone is subdued, we see the function of the original being altered to work more harmoniously with the dominant cultural projects pursued in the magazine. Though both basic arguments are at times softened, there are more moments where the specific idea of regionalism is undermined in the translation than there are instances where the basic anti-imperialist implications of that argument are threatened.

The result is a text that has been processed to function less conflictively within a Cuban cultural project that describes itself as national. The specific features of Tate's argument that pose regionalism against the incursions of notions of cultural nationalism do not work as well in the context of *Orígenes*. Tate's assertions of the importance of an attentiveness to cultural specificities and to the value of tradition are more easily transmuted into expressions of value for the *origenistas*—they too respond to notions of what their culture and tradition are and should be. But the mechanics through which Tate makes these assertions in the service of a subnational cultural basis for literature are not fully replicated in the translated text because their full presence in the context of the magazine would be anomalous.

Tate's deconstruction of the hegemony that the ideology of provincialism seeks to sustain is also at times attenuated in Tro's translation, but Tro's translation generally

preserves the original's deconstructive project. In this way, the translation allies itself with the critiques of U.S. culture in Rodríguez Feo's critical and editorial work. If Tro's translation attenuates the force of Tate's avocation of regionalism, it generally maintains the force of his anti-imperialism.

At the moments where the anti-imperialist force of the original is reduced in the translation, the text shifts back toward the majority position of *Orígenes*, which asserts that the concrete description of the political threats to Cuban culture is less important than the positing and resisting of those threats in spiritual and creative terms. Thus, we can observe oscillations in the function of Tro's translation in the context of *Orígenes* between the concrete and the imagistic poles of the journal's project.

## **Conclusion**

Allen Tate's essay "The New Provincialism" takes a forceful stand on the question of the role of literature in society. His assertions spring from cultural and political agendas that have undergone a complex evolution over the course of his career. Particularly, the conflict between certainty and ambivalence about the stability and utility of history as a system of meaning is a dynamic that helps us to understand the dogmatic nature of Tate's take on the question of history in "Provincialism." As we have noted, the poem "Ode to the Confederate Dead," with its depiction of historical figures as images, and its questioning of human access to the past, would have been a more likely text for incorporation into the conceptual context of *Orígenes*.

Yet, Rodríguez Feo solicits from Tate a text that is generally at odds with the journal's overarching methodologies. This fact illustrates Rodríguez Feo's contrapuntal

function. He often sees his role as editor as one of introducing challenging differences into the textual space of *Orígenes*. If Lezama and Vitier are the most prolific and articulate definers of a coherent cultural agenda for the magazine, Rodríguez Feo introduces texts that challenge that coherence in a productive way.

By publishing Tate's text, Rodríguez Feo introduces a concrete mode of discourse that relies on a stable sense of cultural history into a project that generally organizes itself around the dynamic nature of the metaphor and the malleability of history. This gesture is part of a broader pattern in Rodríguez Feo's work for *Orígenes*. As we have asserted, Rodríguez Feo's critical work evidences an orientation toward sociological and historical analysis that is similar to Tate's. This critical work addresses the issue of U.S. capitalism and imperialism with a directness that is also consonant with Tate's approach. Thus, our analysis of the interaction of Tate's text with its new Cuban context has had the valuable effect of emphasizing a mode of anti-imperialist discourse in *Orígenes* that generally goes unnoticed.

Finally, we have seen how Rodolfo Tro mediates the encounter between Tate's essay and the various conceptual structures of *Orígenes*. Tro's translation manipulates the original such that Tate's assertion of the importance of regionalism is attenuated, while the warning about the growing threat of U.S. cultural imperialism is preserved. The first of these translation effects is part of an agenda to incorporate the text into a Cuban *national*, rather than *regional* context. The second represents an implicit allegiance to Rodríguez Feo's agenda of maintaining a strain of thought that is eccentric to, yet supportive of, the dominant poetics of *Orígenes*.

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## Notes to Chapter Four

<sup>1</sup> Underwood's biography of Tate is quite detailed and useful, though its narrative ends in 1938; a second volume is projected. Squires's biography is less detailed, though it includes more illustrative readings of Tate's literary work. Stewart offers an excellent history of Tate's thinking, in the context of the author's participation in the Fugitive and Agrarian movements. The reader can also use Stewart's work to place Tate's work in relation to the work of John Crowe Ransom and Robert Penn Warren.

<sup>2</sup> Louise Cowan asserts in her 1955 essay on the Fugitives that the Scopes trial was the most proximate cause of Tate's emerging Southern patriotism (191).

<sup>3</sup> In "The Profession of Letters in the South" (1935), Tate laments the attempts of social sciences to impose orderly patterns on human social existence through "...the statistical survey and the conviction that society lives by formula..." (Essays 518).

<sup>4</sup> The original manuscript of the poem, completed in December of 1926, bears the title "Elegy for the Confederate Dead," and includes annotations by John Crowe Ransom. The manuscript is in the possession of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. The first published version of the poem appeared with the title "Ode to the Confederate Dead (1861-65)" in *American Caravan: A Yearbook of American Literature*, pp. 792-94. There were many substantive revisions until 1937, when the poem assumed the form in which it is anthologized today. All citations are from this "final" version, as found in

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*Collected Poems 1919-1976*. For an analysis of the revision process, see Lawrence Kingsley, "The Text of Allen Tate's 'Ode to the Confederate Dead.'"

<sup>5</sup> The speech was delivered on January 6, 1941. The four freedoms outlined in the speech were: "freedom of speech and expression," "freedom to worship God in [one's] own way," "freedom from want," and "freedom from fear."

<sup>6</sup> Rodríguez Feo's intent in publishing Gordon's essay was clearly different from his purposes in selecting Tate's essay. In a letter dated April 2, 1954, Rodríguez Feo tells Gordon: "I think your essay has a special interest to our Latin American readers, because of the point of view from which you examine the art of writing novels and also because you discuss several Catholic writers who are very popular down here among us novel-readers." Whereas Tate's essay interests Rodríguez Feo for its anti-imperialism and its historical-sociological methodology, Gordon's assertions are meant to enter into dialogue with the question of the relevance of religious doctrine to literature in *Orígenes*. Clearly, Gordon's dogmatism bears a problematic relationship to *origenista* religiosity, though it forms an interesting point of reference for the journal's ideologies.

<sup>7</sup> The handful of letters from Rodríguez Feo to Tate that can be found in Princeton University's archives do not give us much information about Tate's intentions in using "The New Provincialism." In a letter dated February 15 [1945], the Cuban editor simply expresses his appreciation: "In the Winter issue of ORIGENES you will see your essay on Provincialism. I am sorry I could not publish it before but you can see our magazine only counts 48 pages. Thank again [sic] for the privilege of printing it and allowing our

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Spanish readers to see the work of one distinguished American critic who is not known south of the border.”

<sup>8</sup> For example, *Orígenes* distances itself from Afro-Cuban literature and art, which it considers a folkloric phenomenon adverse to the creation of a viable national literature. The only exceptions to this stance are the essays and stories of Lydia Cabrera.

<sup>9</sup> In his essay on Emily Dickinson, Tate asserts that “...for Emerson man is greater than any idea and, being himself the Over-Soul, is innately perfect; there is no struggle because ... there is no possibility for error” (Essays 284-5). This statement is remarkably similar to Rodríguez Feo’s assertion of the dangerous optimism that Emerson’s thought encouraged. This parallel marks a basic similarity of analytical orientation between the two writers.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida explores the problematics of translating proper nouns in his essay “Des Tours de Babel.” He illustrates the duality of the proper noun with the example of “Babel”: a pure, untranslatable reference to a tower and a city, and a dynamic grouping of religious, historical and cultural associations, which could be translated, though never perfectly.

## Conclusion

### Textual Negotiation

The sophistication and polyvocality of the *Orígenes* project has encouraged the development of a sizeable body of scholarly work. The consistently high quality of the literary work it presents, along with its unique orientation toward issues of aesthetics, epistemology, religious and cultural traditions, politics and national identity, have marked out a fertile ground for study of these qualities within the implicit frame of Cuban national culture. What this study has attempted to develop is the projection of the *origenista* aesthetics and ideology toward a zone of transnational contact with the United States. For an influence study, such a choice would render unsatisfactory results. Clearly the *origenistas*, if asked to trace the genealogies of their modes of expression, would point to Spanish literature of the early twentieth century and of the Golden Age, and mention the inevitable influence of French Symbolist poets.

The central operation under study here has not been influence, but rather the journal's negotiation, on the established terms of its own cultural agendas, with a group of foreign authors. The analysis of particularly illustrative moments in this negotiation has enlarged and inflected our understanding of the nature of those *origenista* agendas. The ways in which the journal engages in dialogue with foreign texts offer useful insights into the most fundamental and operative aspects of *origenismo*.

Thus, we observe how Rodríguez Feo and Rodríguez Feliú express and defend their journal's opposition to an empiricist or realist aesthetics in their interactions with Wallace Stevens. Rodríguez Feo's assertions of the centrality of Platonism to his



thinking about art and his interest in Spanish mysticism resist Stevens's empiricist agenda by advocating the primacy of the abstract concept and of spiritual feeling in poetic expression. His insistence on a readerly sensibility highlights the valuation of intertextuality in *Orígenes* and conflicts with Stevens's suspicion of textual influence. Rodríguez Feliú's translations of Stevens's poems continue Rodríguez Feo's negotiations with Stevens by attenuating the force of the U.S. poet's arguments for a realist and anti-intertextual aesthetics. In a more dramatic act of manipulation, Rodríguez Feliú introduces imagery with strong religious resonances into a poem that originally advocates a pure empiricism.

This act is repeated in Rodríguez Feo's translation of "Attempt to Discover Life"; the Cuban translator takes a scene that suggests illness and exploitation and animates it with intimations of redemption and regeneration. The difference in Rodríguez Feo's translational intervention is that is clearly invited by the schematic structure of the original, which Stevens uses to provoke just the kind of poetic rewriting the translator enacts. This dynamic, wherein writing already imagines itself in relation to a later translation, and the translation responds to this gesture, forms part of a remarkably rich pattern of textual dialogue between Stevens and Rodríguez Feo.

Rodríguez Feo's incorporation of Stevens's essay "The Relations between Poetry and Painting" continues this dialogue, as its thematics shifts to issues of art and abstraction. Further, it continues the interaction between the religiosity of *Orígenes* and the skepticism of Stevens, through the introduction of the U.S. poet's Nietzschean concept of the Supreme Fiction. Again, Rodríguez Feo allows a profound conceptual

conflict to occur in this interaction, though this conflict continues a thread of exchange on issues of spirituality that can be found throughout the exchange.

Responding to the poetry of T. S. Eliot, both Rodríguez Feo and Lezama's negotiations are more hostile. Both Rodríguez Feo's translation and Lezama's critique produce a caricature of the U. S. poet's philosophy, religiosity and personal characteristics that implicitly elevates opposite qualities with which the journal identifies itself: an optimistic and open attitude toward the complexities of worldly existence, a celebration of the body, and an assertion of the supreme creative agency of the poet. As we have seen, an essential misreading of Eliot's religious thinking, especially his use of the mysticism of St. John of the Cross, motivates the textual caricature that emerges. The mechanics of this misreading illustrate the revision of the Spanish mystic tradition that is operative in the *Orígenes* project.

In our intertextual reading of Tate's "The New Provincialism," we see how Rodríguez Feo and Rodolfo Tro negotiate with Tate's historiography, his aesthetics and his politics in a fashion determined by the complexity of their individual visions of the meaning of *origenismo*. Rodríguez Feo solicits Tate's essay in order to both inflect and support the journal's insistence on an abstract and relatively non-political mode of cultural discourse. The Cuban editor suggests a revision of his journal's fundamental philosophy through his inclusion of Tate's text, introducing a more linear, historical, political and sociological approach to the question of literature's relevance to the development of a culture. This act is deployed in concert with the concrete and historical modes of analysis in Rodríguez Feo's critical essays. Rodolfo Tro enacts his own negotiation through his translation. By blurring the concept of regionalism, Tro

suppresses a conflict with the focus on national culture in *Orígenes*. By allowing the essential force of Tate's anti-imperialist polemic to make itself felt in the translation, Tro works with Rodríguez Feo's implicit agenda of sustaining a more directly confrontational political discourse in *Orígenes*, to support the more abstract, poetic anti-imperialism espoused by Lezama and others.

### **Reflecting Back on the Original**

The analysis of any translation necessitates a careful reading of the original. This study has attempted to produce a close reading of the original that makes possible a more informed analysis of the translation. The relationship between close reading and translation analysis focuses the perspective of the former in accordance with the salient features of the latter. This focusing is constructive; it requires a discipline that can enhance the value of the close reading.

In the case of our analysis of the Rodríguez Feo-Stevens nexus, our reading of translation within the context of a broader, multivalent textual exchange has underlined Stevens's empiricism, a characteristic that does not receive much attention in most readings. Stevens is generally understood as an "abstract" poet, influenced by French Symbolism, and possessed of a remarkable ability to sustain poetic meditations on philosophical questions. This understanding generally ignores the intensity with which the poet attempted to coordinate abstraction with empirical observation in the 1940s and 1950s. Helen Vendler's *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* offers a brilliant analysis of the *operations* of Stevens's poetics, though, when it comes to the question of *origins*, asserts: "Stevens's imagery ... is a system of self-reference, and is its

own explanation” (9). By placing emphasis on Stevens’s interactions with Rodríguez Feo, we are lead to a different mode of analysis, one that would understand the processes of abstraction and metaphor as emerging from a particular *discipline* of observation.

The caricature of Eliot’s poems in Rodríguez Feo’s translations focuses our reading on the complexity and duality of the originals. Jewel Spears Brooker’s notion of liminality, or “betweenness” proves to be a particularly valuable concept for approaching Eliot’s *Quartets*, and can be better appreciated after observing how Rodríguez Feo seeks to transform that liminality into a simplistic polarity. The schematized characterizations of Eliot’s work by Rodríguez Feo and Lezama impel the reader toward a better understanding of an opposite reality: the movements between abnegation and sense experience, atemporality and temporality. Appreciating Eliot’s attempts to reconcile the darkness of abnegation with the light and “grace of sense,” we come to an agreement with Denis Donoghue’s assertion: “It would be absurd to repeat the canard that Eliot hated life and longed only to be rid of it. The poet ... felt the ravishments of sense just as keenly as those poets who advertise their possession of such opulence” (7).

Finally, our contextualization of Allen Tate’s “The New Provincialism” in *Orígenes* has contributed to a fuller understanding of the peculiarities of his methods. In particular, the conflict between his use of history and Lezama’s poetic historiography leads to a closer examination of the construction of a particularly useful version of history in relation to a dominant political agenda in the present. Questioning Tate’s use of a particular historical nostalgia, we have observed how that nostalgia compensates for a profound questioning of the epistemology of history found in his most famous poem.

The relation of Tate's essayistic historiography to its foreign context highlights the fissures and repressions that mark his discourse.

### **The Diverse Functions of Translation**

The methodological emphases of this study have not only allowed us useful insights into the *Orígenes* project and various characteristics of Stevens's, Eliot's and Tate's work, but also have illustrated some of the subtle implications of translation acts in general. It is hoped that these discoveries might encourage studies of translation in other areas of literary history that allow for a broader vision of translation's role in transnational negotiations of discourse.

First, I have attempted to illustrate the importance of evaluating the processes of a translation in relation to a set of articulated literary agendas. Further, through the operations of my interpretation, I espouse a method that looks to a more specific and proximate literary context for the operations of translations than a broadly defined linguistic, or even national, "tradition." I assert in this study that the translational interventions under consideration emerge from specific aspects of an agenda shared by a particular group of Cuban writers. The case of translations published in literary journal is particularly illustrative of the necessity of this kind of focus. The unity that a journal seeks to achieve across the breadth of its contents, in conjunction with the polemical acts of self-definition it deploys, produce the most relevant and coherent context for considering the implications of a translation.

I assert two basic modes in which translation acts relate to this sharply defined context: incorporation and counterpoint. As incorporation, translation acts on those

aspects of a text that produce irreconcilable and *unproductive* dissonances with the conceptual context of the journal. We have seen how Rodríguez Feliú has reshaped Stevens's poems in order to attenuate their empirical and antitextual assertions. Also, we have seen how Rodolfo Tro obfuscates the communication of the notion of regionalism in Tate's essay, as he sees no productive way of relating such an idea to the national perspective of *Orígenes*.

The second of these modes preserves or even exaggerates crucial differences of idea or methodology between the translated text and its new context. As we have seen, this type of gesture can have varying effects. In the case of Rodríguez Feo's caricature of Eliot's mysticism, this underlining of difference serves to highlight a feature of the target context and advocate for its defense, through parodic attacks on the source text's conceptual structures. Where the same editor, working together with translator Rodolfo Tro, allows Tate's argumentative methodology to conflict with its *origenista* context, he seeks to revise and inflect a dominant tenet of the journal's ideology. As a result, he underscores an alternative methodology his own work implicitly advocates. Thus, the contrapuntal mode of translation can be deployed to defend or reshape a domestic context. In both cases, and in contrast to the incorporative mode, the difference that the original text presents is seen as potentially *productive*.

Finally, as we have seen in our analysis of the dialogue between Rodríguez Feo and Stevens, translation can form part of a broader intercourse that takes place through other textual channels. In collating the various materials relevant to the connection between the two men, we observe a coherent conversation threading the disparate activities of correspondence, the writing of poems, and translation. Seeing this

coherence, we are able to achieve a more detailed, subtle and satisfying reading of the significance of translation acts, because we have at our disposal a greater wealth of intertextual connections to examine. The case of Rodríguez Feo and Stevens suggests the value of a more historical and archival approach to the study of translations, where relevant materials are available. This approach makes possible interpretations that marshal more tangible textual evidence for their assumptions.

### **Contact Zones / Reversals of Flow: A Program for Comparative Studies**

Finally, this study, like any extended study of a literary topic that attempts to contribute something new to its field, presents an implicit argument for its particular approach. There are two methodological convictions about literary study that are implicit in my approach to the encounter between *Orígenes* and authors from the United States.

The first consists of an assertion of the importance of studying Latin American and U.S. literatures as interlinked systems of signification. Underlying this agenda is the notion that the cultural referentiality and relevance of literary production always reaches beyond the confines of the nation and of language. The comparatist perspective is not a means for intervention, an agenda of internationalizing national cultural expressions from the outside. Instead, it is a mode of literary analysis that does justice to the underlying international cultural relevance of all literature.

Our understanding of this relevance must be informed by an appreciation of the historical and geopolitical position of the cultures in question. From an understanding of historical reality, the scholar can work toward an explication of authors' critical and imaginative responses to that reality. Thus, I have attempted to give a sense of the

*origenistas*' reaction to the crises in national history to which they are witnesses, as well their responses to the knowledge that those crises are in part caused by a particular relationship with the United States.

In delineating these responses, I try to demonstrate the importance of beginning our analysis from a recognition of the distinctness of approach of each individual author within a cultural space shared by other authors. From such a recognition, I argue for a view that is attentive to the complex interaction between individuality on the one hand, and the impulse toward a group identity that can mobilize a collective response to a cultural and political crisis, on the other.

Thus, the most immediate cultural collectivity considered in any literary study should be the chosen affiliation of a group of authors who imagine a common goal for themselves. The literary, spiritual, and political ties that bind the *Orígenes* group should shape the most immediate context in which we analyze Lezama's, Vitier's, or Rodríguez Feo's work. Only after acknowledging this interactive dynamic should the scholar begin to suggest what an author's claims for national or transnational relevance are. In this way, we can avoid interpretive leaps from individual literary production to the question of that production's relevance to national cultural circumstances without considering the relationality of literary production within a *chosen* notion of cultural belonging. There is, in the case of any literary project, an intranational intertextuality that precedes and determines the dynamics of any kind of international intertextuality. It is crucial to make the former explicit before venturing into an exploration of the latter.

In describing the transnational textual encounters between *Orígenes* and Stevens, Eliot and Tate, I argue for a method that engages in two different, but coordinated, modes



of comparison. First, the scholar must examine the concrete points of contact between literary producers on each side of a cultural, national, and/or linguistic divide. There are usually numerous artifacts of concrete textual encounters between literary traditions—in the form of correspondence, editing decisions, and translations—available to the researcher who wishes to realize a comparative project. Beginning by collating these documents, one can reconstruct a history of contact, and subsequently analyze the broader cultural issues raised in that history.

The second mode of comparison, which tackles broader consonances and dissonances of literary agenda and methodology—the “compare and contrast” mode of analysis—should be built from the concrete materials of textual exchange gathered in the first mode of comparative analysis. Thus, one can establish not only what different authors have in common or disagree upon, but also make the important step of explaining how these authors imagine their own work, the work of others, and the proper means for managing similarities and differences in direct contact with those others. Upon making this step, we have contributed something more useful to the discussion than a broad analysis of common or distinct repertoires of tropes, organizing conceptual structures, or socio-historical experiences. We have contributed a knowledge of how authors negotiate the intercultural relationality of their literary work. This knowledge, most immediately, inserts a new chapter into literary history by narrating events previously ignored by studies with other methodological orientations. Secondly, this knowledge helps the scholar reflect upon his previous understanding of an author’s work as self-sufficient whole, clarifying, inflecting, or disturbing previous critical encapsulations of that work.

Not only do I argue for the importance of a historical and archival approach to projects of literary comparison, but also for the importance, within the field of translation studies, of studies that examine the translation of First World texts by Third World translators. Currently, theoretical models for cross-cultural translation tend toward the examination of First World appropriations of Third World cultural expressions through translation. Volumes like Bassnett and Trivedi's *Post-colonial translation: Theory and Practice* and Maier and Dingwaney's *Between Languages and Cultures: Translation and Cross-Cultural Texts* are outstanding contributions to what has become a highly developed system for analyzing the political implications of translation. Yet, they focus heavily on how U.S. and Western European translators shape visions of exoticized Others through translation techniques that mobilize postcolonial agendas. What is underemphasized in this approach is how the Latin American translator might enact a resistance through her construction of a First World Other.

Rather than negate the importance of these contributions, I wish to suggest that they are an excellent means of developing half of the total picture of cross-cultural translation. What must be better developed is an understanding of how literary producers in culturally and economically colonized nations actively negotiate their relationship to a more dominant cultural tradition and affirm their own values through the subtle, multivalent, and empowering act of translation. More studies that examine the flow of representation from the Third World to the First are necessary within the field of translation studies.

This reversal should not ignore the geopolitical and global economic relationship between two nations like the one between the U.S. and Cuba in the 1940s and 1950s.

Instead, studies should avoid drawing a false connection between such a relationship and the power balance inherent in a cross-cultural literary exchange. The definition of a literary project and the negotiation of the interaction between that project and foreign texts are acts that occur in a space where power is exerted through the manipulation of images and discursive modes. In this abstract scene of interaction, those who frame the context into which a foreign text is to be received are in a position of power.

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