

POETS ON THE EDGE

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Vicente Huidobro, César Vallejo,
Juan Luis Martínez, and Néstor Perlongher

Jesús Sepúlveda



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To Wolf Sohlich

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INTRODUCTION

The noun ‘edge’ defines the outside limit of an object, an area or surface; or a place or part far away from the center of something.¹ According to the dictionary, being ‘on edge’ is to be tense, nervous or irritable. As a verb, the word ‘edge’ gives the idea of gradually, carefully and furtively moving into a particular direction; that is to say, toward the outside limits of a given surface or perimeter. To be away from the center is also to be in an eccentric place, deviated or departed from the center or from the line of a circle. The Latin *ex* (out of or from) and *centrum* (center or the main part of something) can be useful to understand such an eccentric place as a locus of enunciation from which the poetic subject *on the edge* emits his/her voice. This locus of enunciation suggests a liminal or marginal location in relation to the center—or the place where the hegemonic discourse is articulated. Poets on the edge refer then to a group of poets whose relationship with the center (the canonical and hegemonic discourses) is always uneasy and problematic. And this complex association with the hegemonic center can be the outcome of multiple factors. Most of the time this uneasiness makes particular poetics more interesting than others because it shapes poetry in such a way that it overextends language, creates eccentric subjects and/or represents the world as an edgy place whose stability can be subverted at any time.

One could certainly argue that this is what poetry has expressed since its origin. For example, it is plausible to claim that Greek poet Archilocus of Paros (680-645 BC) located his innovative use of poetic meter on the limits of Homeric and Hesodian canon. It is also possible to state that the pirate representation of Spanish poet José de Espronceda (1808-1842) reveals a Romantic subjectivity that confronts nineteenth-century religious and national Spanish values while he embraces an antipatriotic and anticlerical desire for freedom: “Que es mi barco mi tesoro, / que es mi Dios mi libertad, / mi ley la

¹ OED. ‘Edge.’ *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, 2015. http://0-www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/edge/.

fuerza y el viento. / mi única patria la mar”² [My treasure is my gallant bark, / My only God is liberty; / My law is might, the wind my mark, / My country is the sea.”³ From Villon to Rimbaud and Baudelaire, or from Coleridge to the Beats, there is a long list of eccentric poets who could be examples of poets on the edge. Although this might sound an exaggeration, it is not because the vast lineage of rebels and *poètes maudits* as well as eccentric poetics has permanently been in tension with the power structure and hegemonic discourse. Even when the poet is dependent on the economic power that provides financial support, the possibilities for the expression of poetics on the edge are often open. Spanish poet Luis de Góngora (1561-1627), for example, had an ambivalent relationship with the court and his readers, which does not mean he could necessarily be considered a poet on the edge. But the long resistance of his acceptance in the canon in spite of his great popularity shows he inhabited a liminal space in the Spanish imagination, almost marginal. While he was alive, he never published his manuscripts. However, he was “convencido de que esta[ba] renovando la poesía española”⁴ [convinced he was renovating Spanish poetry] by writing in “an unprecedented manner.”⁵ This manner of writing is also a way to subtly criticize the Spanish conquest while avoiding inquisitorial consequences. Through the identification of Columbus’ caravels with fir trees piloted by greed and the imperial enterprise with a violation—if not a rape—of transatlantic cultures, Góngora writes his protest within the limits of the Spanish imperial ideology; that is to say, on the edge: “Piloto hoy la Cudicia, no de errantes / árboles, más de selvas inconstantes, / ... Abetos suyos tres aquel tridente / violaron a Neptuno,” [‘Covetousness the pilot is to-day / Of wandering forests not of shifting trees, ... / ‘Three fir trees late of this all-powerful one / (Where hitherto no other sailor trod) / Wrested his trident from the watery god.]⁶ These heterodox manners of experiencing poetry usually challenge the standardizing frames of representation of reality and the ways language is instrumentalized. Such instrumentalization tends thus to flatten and make uniform our vision of the world according to a pre-established mold. Poets on the edge tend to subvert that mold by pushing the possibilities of language to its limits.

² Espronceda, *Obras poéticas*, 25.

³ Kennedy, *Hispanic Anthology*, 427-28.

⁴ Martínez Arancón, *La batalla en torno a Góngora*, xv.

⁵ Wilson, *The Solitudes*, xiii.

⁶ Góngora, *The Solitudes*, lines 392-402, 28-29.

Latin American poetry constitutes as such through its struggle with the hegemonic centers of power and this instrumentalization of language throughout the entire period of colonization. Thus, in order to truly become Latin American and not an echo of poetics practiced in metropolitan Madrid, Latin American poets located themselves in a lateral boundary outside of the limits of colonial discourse. Arguably that moment of literary independence occurred with *Modernismo*⁷ although there still are several examples of vernacular poetry during the colonial period. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695), for instance, is well known for the tension she produced as a playwright and poet as well as a scholar who openly criticized the patriarchal society of her times, stressing the canonical Spanish Baroque and developing a primal Mexican literature. Although she occupied privileged spaces⁸ in order to have the sufficient independence to develop her work, her status as a poet from the Americas was overshadowed by the colonial discourses that appropriated her as a Spanish poet born in Mexico or, as Elías Rivers put it, “la última gran figura de la poesía del Siglo de Oro”⁹ [the last great figure of Golden Age poetry].

The same way Góngora’s canonization did not occur until the Generation of 1927 reestablished him on the literary Spanish Parnassus, the unique poetic values of Sor Juana were not appreciated until the emergence of Latin American *Modernismo* by the end of the nineteenth century. Critics such as Emilio Abréu Gómez, Ezequiel Chávez, E. J. Gates, Alfonso Méndez Plancarte, Amado Nervo, Alfonso Reyes, Pedro Salinas, Dorothy Schons, Lota M. Spell, and Karl Vosler were crucial to start dimensioning Sor Juana as a truly Latin American poet and not only as an extension of the Peninsular Spanish Baroque in the Americas.¹⁰ Octavio Paz’s book *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o las trampas de la fe* (1982) is perhaps the most famous study of the

⁷ I will use the Spanish word *Modernismo* from now on in order to avoid any confusion with American Modernism whose beginning can be situated around Ezra Pound’s publication of *Personae* in 1909. While Latin American *Modernismo* is much earlier and its beginning has been dated around 1870, Modernism in the English language corresponds to what is called the historical avant-garde in Latin America and Europe.

⁸ Sor Juana was appointed maid-in-waiting of Vicereine Leonor when she was 16 years old, spending five years in the palace of Viceroyalty of New Spain in Mexico before entering in 1669 into the Convent of the Order of St. Jerome, where she lived the rest of her life.

⁹ Cruz, *Antología*, 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

poet. In this text Paz places Sor Juana as one of the most important poetic voices of the continent, unfolding a symbolic interpretation of her “Primero Sueño” [First Dream] according to the Hermetic tradition. The feminist interpretations of Sor Juana have also proliferated in the last forty years, Stephanie Merrim’s *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (1991) being one of the most cited works.¹¹

But this hesitation to place Sor Juana as a Latin American poet resides not only in her ambivalent relationship with power and the Baroque forms and Gongorian language but also in the colonial system that denied autonomy and independence to the colonies. There was indeed a locus of enunciation from which Sor Juana wrote—a place where poetry, theology and intellectual curiosity abruptly meet. My argument is that such a place—where knowledge, writing and experience abruptly meet—is the condition of Latin American poets *on the edge*. In other words, a place where “a decolonial aesthetics may occur through the displacement of the systems of coloniality that situate the horizon of knowledge”¹² and poetics. In agreement with Alejandro Vallega and his discussion of Dussel’s notion of philosophy of liberation, a poetics of liberation can only be experienced as a *radical exteriority* in order to allow the Latin American subject to detach from the “colonizing dispositions operative at the level of embodiment and sensibility.”¹³ This detachment is equivalent to the literary independence that *Modernismo* initiated and the historical avant-garde materialized. Perhaps that is the reason why Vallega hears “in Vallejo’s words the sensibility...found behind the philosophy of liberation...sustained by proximity, the other, and now, radical lived exteriority.”¹⁴

Proximities and distances connect then to a poetic sensitivity, which is distinctive to Latin American poetry created by marginal loci of enunciation of poets on the edge. This distinctiveness becomes evident for Latin American avant-gardes through their eccentric location, which—on the contrary to

¹¹ Besides the names mentioned, there is a long list of scholars from Latin America and the U.S who have studied and written about Sor Juana in the last decades, among them, Electa Arenal, José Pascual Buxó, Marie Cécile Bénassy-Berling, Emilie Bergmann, Verónica Grossi, Julie Greer Johnson, Asunción Lavrin, Frederick Luciani, Alessandra Luiselli, Georgina Sabat-Rivers, Nina Scott, Rosa Perelmuter, and Amanda Powell.

¹² Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*, 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

the European avant-gardes—do not remain “attached to an assumption of their own universality.”¹⁵ Unlike many European avant-gardists who reinforced universal cultural paradigms, “the avant-gardists in Latin America explored the limits of a national, culturalist response to [the] crisis of the universality of civilization.”¹⁶ This is the crisis that World War I triggered and art and poetry reconfigured in the light of the potential and failures of technology in the age of mechanical reproduction of the arts.

But the peculiarity of the historical Latin American avant-garde differentiates from its European counterpart through the acceptance of its own location on the edge, far away from the metropolitan center. Fed by a cosmopolitan spirit, the Latin American vanguardists integrated into their ethos the European notions of progress and technology almost without remorse. Even *Modernista* poet Rubén Darío (1867-1916) joined cosmopolitanism and the notion of originality. His revolution in the Spanish language was indeed possible through this aperture to international influences, appropriating French symbolism and Verlaine’s musical versification to his new Spanish verse. This is the stigma of Modernity, and it is also the marker of the hybrid complex of pre-modern and modern Latin American aesthetics of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. As Fernando Rosenberg points out vis-a-vis Jorge Schwartz’s quotation, “the independence movement in language initiated by Rubén Darío doesn’t mean...that we will renounce, much less pretend not to recognize, that every morning we use Swiss tooth paste, French towels, and English soap.”¹⁷ Indeed, the notions of originality and novelty are enhanced by the cultural richness of hybridism and *mestizaje*, being a crucial element for *Modernismo* as well as for the historical Latin American avant-garde.

It was during the expansion of capital between 1870 and 1914—during the so-called *belle époque*—that Rubén Darío’s subjectivism reinforces the criterion of dissimilarity—updating the romantic ‘I’ and opening the literary milieu to the principle of ‘originality.’ According to Ángel Rama, this process fosters the appearance of an artistic movement in Latin America, independent from Spain, whose consequence is the foundation of the “autonomía poética del continente”¹⁸ [poetic autonomy of the continent]. This new scenario—more sophisticated division of labor, new laws of circulation and commercial

¹⁵ Rosenberg, *The Avant-Garde and Geopolitics in Latin America*, 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁸ Rama, *Rubén Darío y el Modernismo*, 60.

exchange, the transformation of capitalism into a global economy, and the predominance of bourgeois values—substitutes the institution of patronage with a free market of unknown consumers of art—the public. The immediate consequence of this situation is the marginality of the poet, whose work is no longer considered a profession but a vocation. The image of the marginal poet erases the historic, pedagogic, judicial, and religious functions of literature. And the representations of the “vate romántico” [romantic bard] and the neoclassic “civil poet” come to an end.¹⁹ Writers become then professionals of journalism and education—as Darío portrays in “El rey burgués” [The Bourgeois King]²⁰—who must “dar vueltas a un manubrio [de] una caja de música”²¹ [turn the crank of the hurdy-gurdy] in order to be part of the spectacle.

This new context pushes *Modernista* poets to search for ‘originality’ in order to patent their own work and preserve it from any imitation. Originality is seen then as the only way to ensure art is unrepeatable in a market that has begun to reproduce everything, forcing the poet to become a producer of artistic goods to sell aesthetic merchandise to the public. This commodification destroys the image of the romantic artist who has been seen as a creative genius. This creative spirit has been represented in the Spanish-speaking world in different ways. Federico García Lorca (1898-1936) delivered in a conference in Havana and in Buenos Aires in 1933²² his theory of the *duende* [elf] as the embodiment of inspiration, following perhaps Darío’s representation of the muse as a blue bird, which tries to escape from the poet’s mind. But in the new global market Lorca’s *duende* is condemned to die. In effect, the money-oriented system implanted by the rapid expansion of capitalism is captured in Darío’s piece “El pájaro azul”²³ [Blue Bird] in which the young poet Garcín must commit suicide at the end of the story in order to solve the contradiction produced by the artistic market. For Lorca, however, his *duende* had to die on the edge of the Spanish Civil War. Being the spirit of

¹⁹ Ibid., 46.

²⁰ This short story was published for the first time in *Azul* [Blue] (1888) in Valparaíso while Rubén Darío was still living in Chile. Darío arrived in Valparaíso in June of 1886 and left Chile in 1888 for his native Nicaragua.

²¹ Darío, *Azul*, 31.

²² The conference “Teoría y juego del duende” [Theory and Play of the Duende] was collected and translated by Christopher Maurer. See *In Search of Duende*, Federico García Lorca (New York: New Directions, 1998), 48-62.

²³ This story is also part of *Azul* by Rubén Darío (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1966), 77-81.

evocation that represents the gypsy soul of flamenco and Andalucía, Lorca's *duende*—and himself as a person—crashed against the Fascist forces one month later after the coup Franco and the conservative Nationalist generals initiated. Lorca was assassinated on August 19, 1936. His body has never yet been found.

In this new sociopolitical context of artistic market in which the art exchange system rapidly becomes mediated by the monetarized aesthetics, the romantic-symbolist poet is obliged to die in order to make the existence of the modern poet possible. Thus, the modern poet brings a new *Modernismo* into Latin America—contributing from a peripheral and marginal place to the universalization of the capitalist cultural market, universalizing at the same time the figure of the poet. The poet locates then in a peripheral place—on the edge—of the global market and the hegemonic cultural metropolis, preparing the cultural market for its new phase. As Marx and Engels had set forward in the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848, through the “exploitation of the world market” the bourgeoisie has “given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country.”²⁴ *Modernista* poets certainly benefited and enriched their literature from this simulacrum of cosmopolitanism, incorporating china and Asian porcelain artifacts, Greek mythological characters, and pre-Hispanic aestheticized royalty into the poem as Darío did. But, although this moment of Latin American literary production and consumption has a cosmopolitan character, it is with the Latin American avant-garde—a sort of new *Modernismo* or post-*Modernismo*—that the continental literature overcomes its complex of peripheral literature, initiating what Guillermo Sucre called “una gran época creadora”²⁵ [a great creative era]. And without abandoning their cosmopolitan halo, the avant-garde poets created their universe incorporating their own tradition “as a critical answer to the question of the place of Latin America within a larger modernity in which colonial projects, past and present, continue to be foundational.”²⁶

Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro (1893-1948) is doubtless who best embodies this cosmopolitan tradition initiated by *Modernismo*, opening the path for the great Latin American avant-garde's creative era. In 1914 he established his original *art poétique* through the manifesto *Non Serviam*, hoping to renovate the poetic prosody of the Spanish language, and initiating one of the most fascinating literary projects of the Latin American avant-garde.

²⁴ Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 12.

²⁵ Sucre, *La máscara, la transparencia*, 27.

²⁶ Rosenberg, *The Avant-Garde*, 163.

Huidobro was also a novelist and a public persona with radical political views. He extensively traveled through the Southern Cone and Europe, and established friendship with the main intellectuals and writers of his times. He debated against Breton and launched his own ‘ism’ (*Creacionismo*), while he was an active participant of the Chilean literary *guerrilla* that included Pablo Neruda and Pablo de Rokha, among others. As Fernando Rosenberg puts it, Huidobro represents the “epitome of the cosmopolitan writer.”²⁷ And his influences, through his intense and exciting cultural and literary activity, reached different avant-garde groups disseminated through Latin America and Europe, while he articulated “equally in French or Spanish the experience of a universal subject of modernity [who opens a] space of free flights between angst and acceleration.”²⁸ This space is perhaps the characteristic of his times marked by the early twentieth-century crisis of western civilization. As symptoms of this crisis we can name World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution, the Great Depression, the Spanish Civil War, and World War II. The first chapter of this book will address his one major work, *Altazor*, whose first version was written—according to Huidobro—in French in 1919²⁹ (although the entire book was published in Spanish in 1931). In this book Huidobro stages a poetic voice that represents a subject on the edge falling with a parachute into the atmosphere.

In the second chapter I will examine the work of Peruvian poet César Vallejo (1892-1938). Vallejo is perhaps the most innovative poet of the historical avant-garde. He published a crucial collection of poetry in 1922 called *Trilce*, whose poetic matter still remains a mystery to our days. He drastically distances from *Creacionismo* and any other ‘ism’ existing at the time, projecting a unique *mestizo* voice as a reaffirmation of the poetic personality of the continent. After leaving Peru to establish himself in Paris and never returning to his native land, he was involved in the Spanish Civil War and traveled three times to the Soviet Union. After his death, he left two equally extraordinary books of poetry that his widow, Georgette Vallejo, published posthumously: *España, aparta de mí este cáliz* [*Spain, Take This Cup from Me*], and *Poemas Humanos* [*Human Poems*]. In his poetry, Vallejo

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ In 1925 Juan Emar published in *La Nación* in Santiago, Chile a translation from French to Spanish of the “Preface” of *Altazor*. According to Federico Schopf this may be the “first public testimony of the poem;” cf. Schopf, “Introducción a Vicente Huidobro,” n.p.

updates notions such as ‘solidarity’ and ‘collectivity,’ presenting an untold human sentiment of pain and suffering similar to a sacrificed Christ who resurrects at the end of his journey. Echoing Jean Franco, Cecilia Enjuto Rangel points out apropos of Vallejo’s book on Spain that “Vallejo’s poetics of resurrection aim to produce immortality; the word, the book itself is an achievement of cultural transmission that goes beyond nature’s cycle.”³⁰ But Vallejo is not only a poet on the edge for the locus of enunciation from which he locates his voice, although most of the time he does it in a hermetic and cryptic manner which overshadows the context of his poetry—his imprisonment in Trujillo in his native Peru and the atrocities experienced during the war in Spain. He is also a poet on the edge because he overextends the capabilities of meaning by contorting Spanish syntax, which assaults itself in a self-reflexive dialectic. This language experimentation is where the power of his poetry partially resides. Thus, Vallejo creates one of the most radical—and yet marginal—voices of Latin American avant-garde poetry by ‘*latinoamericanizing*’ the poetic language of the hemisphere, which attains an Andean aura in his prosody. This plays well with the ethos of *Modernismo*’s poetic autonomy as well as following the footprints of other Latin American avant-garde poets who develop a strategy of self-affirmation to offset the marginality of the continent in relation to the European avant-garde movements.³¹ However, if this is true for Uruguayan poet Jules Supervielle (1884-1960) and Peruvian poet César Moro (1903-1956)—both of whom had a problematic relationship with Surrealism—it is only partially true, or not true at all, for those writers that Saúl Yurkievich calls the “centros radiantes”³² [radiant centers] of contemporary Latin American poetry. Thus, Vallejo’s self-affirmation occurs in spite of his “cosmopolitan breath without ever renouncing a place of belonging, without closing off access to the enigma of community by engaging in the free flight of cosmopolitan detachment.”³³

The third chapter of this book links the spirit of the avant-garde with the Chilean *Neovanguardia* [New avant-garde] in its political context during the military dictatorship. In this chapter I explore the monumental book of Juan Luis Martínez (1949-1993), *La nueva novela* [*The New Novel*], published in

³⁰ Enjuto Rangel, *Cities in Ruins*, 190.

³¹ Cruz, “Discursos de la modernidad en las culturas periféricas,” 34.

³² Yurkievich, *Fundadores de la nueva poesía latinoamericana*, 7. According to Yurkievich, these foundational poets are César Vallejo, Vicente Huidobro, Jorge Luis Borges, Oliverio Girondo, Pablo Neruda, and Octavio Paz.

³³ Rosenberg, *The Avant-Garde*, 153.

1977. By addressing Martínez's book, I outline the parameters of the Chilean social experiment led by the military regime and free-market politics—the so-called neoliberal economic platform. In effect, the installation of a panoptic society of control in Chile served as a model for the so-called 'globalization,' and *La nueva novela* informs us of that process. *La nueva novela* is indeed a book symbolically condemned by politics and the decay of the nation. And the text plays with that. At the time, it avoided censorship and was able to criticize, in a playful way, the pillars of western civilization through the tradition of western critical thinking. This mechanism becomes a sort of negative dialectic that stages a utopian project before the national crisis and the cruel reality of disappearances, addressing the complex relationship between art and empirical reality. But *La nueva novela* is also a reinterpretation and an appropriation of the avant-garde aesthetics, which re-semanticizes cultural and historic characters, movements, monuments, and events: Rimbaud and Marx, Lewis Carroll and Magritte, Superman and the Tower of Pisa, Pataphysics and the Holocaust among many other references. Perhaps this is the reason why Roberto Bolaño states that Martínez read Duchamp in an exemplary way before his disappearance, meaning his silence.³⁴ Indeed, after *La nueva novela*, Martínez only published an artistic object which is a box with plastic bags filled with soil from Chile's Central Valley and labeled with the names of the four greatest Chilean poets of the last century: Gabriela Mistral, Vicente Huidobro, Pablo de Rokha and Pablo Neruda. In 1985 he published a facsimile of *La nueva novela*. And ten years after his death, the Universidad Diego Portales published a supposedly unpublished manuscript of Martínez's lyrical poetry entitled *Poemas del otro* [*Poems of the Other*] (2003). However, this book is a translation of Martínez's homonym Juan Luis Martínez (1953-), a Swiss-Catalan poet whose name is written without the accent over the i, and who published in Paris a poetry collection entitled *Le Silence et sa brisure* [*Silence and its Break*] in 1976. According to Scott Weintraub—the young professor who discovered Martínez's joke—the Chilean poet had access to this book through the library of the Chilean-French Institute of Valparaíso.³⁵ In agreement with Marcelo Riosco, Martínez's black humor and playful spirit make out of him a sort of *Scriptor Ludens*³⁶ [playful writer]. This becomes evident when we read the account of the Chilean editor of *Poemas del Otro*, Cristóbal Joannon, at the moment he

³⁴ Bolaño, *Entre paréntesis*, 89.

³⁵ Weintraub, *La última broma de Juan Luis Martínez*, 24.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

asked Martínez for the origin of the poems. Joannon tells us that Martínez's answer was categorical (and literal too), although Joannon thought Martínez was talking about the famous Rimbaldian dictum: "*Je est un autre*" [I is another]. Martínez told Joannon that he did not write the poems but the *other* one did. The discovery by Wientraub more than ten years after the publication of Martínez's translation of his Swiss-Catalan homonym has recovered some of the lost aura for Martínez's figure and works. Indeed, confusion and humor can already be mapping itself in *La nueva novela*, which mocks the military regime in the eyes of political censors in moments of the most brutal repression. It is, in effect, that location on the verge between fiction and reality, censorship and subversion, politics and humor that makes Martínez a poet on the edge.

The last chapter of this book is about Argentine poet Néstor Perlongher (1949-1992). Perlongher was a prolific writer of poetry and essays, incorporating in his works his queer, political and anthropological concerns. Like Martínez, Perlongher also initiated his literary career during the military dictatorship. He first published in 1980 the poetry collection *Austria-Hungría* [*Austria-Hungary*], but it was with his book *Alambres* [*Wires*] (1989), which received the Boris Vian Award for Argentine Literature in 1987, that he attracted the attention of readers and critics. The emblematic poem "Cadáveres" [Cadavers] (1989), which was also published in cassette form, is included in this book. This poem recounts the countless number of corpses in the country in a clear allusion to the political disappearances, at the same time that he also refers to the social structure of Argentina and the foundational conflict between Buenos Aires and the rural provinces, and Sarmiento's nineteenth-century dichotomy between civilization and barbarism. For Nicolás Rosa, the cadaver symbolizes the bitter face of castration of the country, arguing that this word implies by definition a fall—the Spanish *cadáver* comes from the Latin *cadere* which means *caer*, to fall.³⁷ The notion of castration helped Perlongher to explore his homoerotic sensitivity in a country that was mostly homophobic at the time. In fact, Perlongher was an active member of the Gay Liberation Front and also participated in Trotskyist and Anarchist factions. He was arrested and prosecuted in 1976. In 1981 he moved to São Paulo where he pursued graduate studies in Anthropology. There he connected with the Brazilian church of Santo Daime, starting to partake of the psychotropic beverage ayahuasca on a regular basis until he died of AIDS in 1992. From this period are his remarkable poetry collections

³⁷ Rosa, *Tratados sobre Néstor Perlongher*, 54.

Aguas aéreas [*Air Waters*]³⁸ (1991) and *Chorro de las iluminaciones* [*Gush of Illuminations*], published posthumously in Venezuela days after he died in 1992. But his biography alone does not entirely explain why he was a poet on the edge. Perlongher developed a particular writing he borrowed from Neobaroque writers, especially Cuban poet José Lezama Lima (1910-1976), adapting this style to the Atlantic Southern Cone around the La Plata River. He called his style *Neobarroso*, which many writers adopted at the time, referring to the *barro* (mud) that there is in the sediment of the river that divides Buenos Aires from Montevideo. Like Vallejo, Perlongher also overextended the possibilities of language into an almost incomprehensible matter—the Baroque shell, which tends to cover the empty spaces of reality. He updated Lezama Lima’s notions of tension and Plutoism [*Plutonismo*] as an “art of counter-conquest”³⁹ into an aesthetic of internal resistance. Indeed, Perlongher tried to verbally occupy the vacuum left by disappearances and absences. Such occupation happened in an anarchic way because reality and the nation were in decline, were falling down. Perhaps that is the reason why Nicolás Rosa defines *Neobarroso* as “an anarchic organization of the decline as well as a tongue of obliquity, an abject spelling.”⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Roberto Echavarren finds in such a spelling a political statement because “politics, through arts, reveals itself as a style.”⁴¹ It is, in sum, this “Baroque condition [as] an expansion in relation to the discourse and referent,”⁴² which makes of Perlongher a poet on the edge.

³⁸ Although Jill Kuhnheim has translated this title as *Aqueous Airs*, I have preferred a more direct and literal translation to show the estrangement the image ‘*aguas aéreas*’ suggests. See *Spanish American Poetry*, Jill Kuhnheim (Austin: University of Texas, 2004), 118.

³⁹ Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, 80.

⁴⁰ Rosa, *Tratados*, 89.

⁴¹ Echavarren, “Un fervor neobarroco,” 118.

⁴² Rosa, *Tratados*, 82.

CHAPTER I

The *Petit God* Vicente Huidobro and the Poet as a Creator

The Historical Avant-Garde and the Emergence of Mass Society

The historical avant-garde was a response to a sensitivity appearing in the western hemisphere in the early twentieth century. This sensitivity was closely related to the events occurring during a very restless period of time: the First World War, the appearance of Fascism, Stalinism, the Great Depression, and the Spanish Civil War. Economically, these decades were characterized by the expansion of transnational capital, which reorganized the hegemonic world after the Second World War, leading to the rise of American Imperialism.⁴³ It was also a moment of mechanization of social life; mass societies started producing mass individuals.

Walter Benjamin calls this moment “the age of mechanical reproduction,”⁴⁴ identifying it with the loss of the aura of the poet, who is forced to enter into the market to sell his/her poetry as merchandise. Darío had early portrayed this mercantilization of poetry in his short story “El rey burgués”⁴⁵ [the Bourgeois King], advancing what the poet would be becoming in the era of mechanization and the boom of modern media. For Benjamin photography is the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction, although he recognizes that photography and films together represent the modern media. These new technologies must have had an impact on human consciousness in the early twentieth century, which makes Benjamin suggest that mass media implies that “mass reproduction is aided especially by the reproduction of masses.”⁴⁶ The aura of the work of art is then withered, which means—in Benjamin’s words—the partial “liquidation of the traditional value of the

⁴³ Osorio, “Prefacio” to *Manifestos, proclamas y polémicas*, xxiii.

⁴⁴ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 217-251.

⁴⁵ Darío, *Azul*, 27-33.

⁴⁶ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 251 n21.

cultural heritage.”⁴⁷ This process can also be described as the replacement of the cult value—which is based on ritual function—by the exhibition value. The uniqueness of art—that is to say, its aura—is lost because “the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value.”⁴⁸ With the exhibition value, embodied by cinema and photography, the new function of the work of art becomes an artistic—or incidental—function.⁴⁹ Thus, the mechanical reproduction of arts has a progressive drive, so to speak, because it is an emancipation of “the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.”⁵⁰ To a certain extent, this emancipating aspect of mechanical reproduction transforms the *reproduced* work of art into a *designed* work of art for reproducibility, which is, according to Benjamin, a practice-politics.⁵¹ This process has a double effect. On one hand, via the separation of art from its basis in cult by mechanical reproduction, the semblance of art’s autonomy disappears forever.⁵² On the other hand, such separation produces a reaction of the masses toward art.⁵³ In effect, in this new scenario the masses become the public that occupies the position of the critic. However, despite this position of privilege as examiner, the public does not need to pay attention at the movies when it is in such a position because a technological device—the camera—already mediates what is being exhibited. The public then is a non-critical mass spectator mediated by mechanical reproduction. That mediation abolishes the aura of the work of art and reinforces a self-alienation, which can drive humankind to experience “its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.”⁵⁴ This is what Huidobro seems to represent when *Altazor*, his poetic voice and alter ego, flies over the ruins of Europe and observes the effects of World War I:

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁴⁹ Benjamin says that with the absolute emphasis of the modern media on exhibition value, “the work of art becomes a creation with entirely new functions, among which the one we are conscious of, the artistic value, later may be recognized as incidental.” *Illuminations*, Walter Benjamin (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 225.

⁵⁰ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 224.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 226.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 242.

Soy yo que está hablando en este año 1919
 Es invierno
 Ya la Europa enterró todos sus muertos
 Y un millar de lágrimas hacen una sola cruz de nieve.

(1974, 30)

[This is me talking now in 1919
 When it's winter
 And Europe has buried all its dead
 And a million tears become a single cross of snow.]

(Trans. Jerome Rothenberg 1981, 95)

The destruction of war opened the doors for the aesthetic pleasure of political discourses, which rapidly disseminated through Europe. Borrowing Adorno's words, this is a moment of "absolute reification"⁵⁵—although he coins this famous phrase much later in relation to the horror of Auschwitz and the impediment of critical thinking to escape its own mind. Technological mediation though becomes part of the new machinery of war enhanced by reproduced art. As Benjamin puts it, Italian Futurist F. T. Marinetti "expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology."⁵⁶ In effect, over the ruins of war, the self-alienation of art allows its instrumentalization by political opponents. In this sense, Fascism renders "the aesthetic, [while] Communism responds by politicizing art."⁵⁷ In this context, "the lyric poet with a halo" is not only antiquated—like Baudelaire suggests in "Perte D'Auréole"⁵⁸ [A Lost Halo]—but is also a shocked subjectivity.⁵⁹ The sensation of the modern age that Benjamin sees in Baudelaire is, in effect, "the disintegration of the aura in the experience of the shock."⁶⁰ This is the experience of modernity that removes the aura of the poet's head. As in the ritual function of arts, the aura represents a transposi-

⁵⁵ Adorno, *Prisms*, 34.

⁵⁶ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 242.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 299-300.

⁵⁹ Benjamin *Illuminations*, 192.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 194.