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***Altazor* and Huidobro's "Aesthetic Individualism"**

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

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

(It would be wrong to take Huidobro's understanding of the historical importance of the Russian events, on this occasion, to an extreme. His class origin, his intellectual training, the unilaterally artistic project that guides him constitute an unstoppable barrier in many ways. But, on the flip side, neither would it be right to consider his interest in the Bolshevik revolution as lacking any meaning.)<sup>1</sup>

The destruction of the old political system, Concha adds, and the creation of a new aesthetic meld at the beginning of the twentieth century and during the height of the avant-garde, only later to part ways (70–71). As commentators on the avant-garde have duly noted, affirming the innovative, the potential of the youth, the unbridled freedom in the aesthetic realm, the creation of new artistic realms as well as shocking the bourgeoisie and overwhelming the political and artistic status quo, all these were in the air until at least the beginning of the Spanish civil war. So—one could argue—even an unlikely

and privileged figure like Huidobro was won over to the celebration of the new in the artistic dimension and even in the political sphere. Indeed, like many avant-gardists, Huidobro assumed, at least from 1930 to 1940, that the Aesthetic Revolution would go hand in hand with social revolution.

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

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

As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> anarchism became a political force in the late nineteenth century in Chile (and in the mid-nineteenth century in Europe) as a response to the political stranglehold the oligarchy had on politics and economics, and, as such, it served as a catalyst for labor unions, student groups, disenfranchised artists, and bohemians.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as Angel Cappelletti notes, with the triumph of the Russian revolution in 1917, anarchism's political influence began to wane and ultimately fizzled out as the Communist Party assumed the role of vanguard of working class struggles in Chile (LXXXIX). Yet, as happened in Europe, according to Donald G. Egbert and Miklós Szabolcsi, the anarchists' aesthetic ideas survived and provided the impetus for the avant-garde (Egbert 339–66, Szabolcsi 4–17). The avant-garde, then, became the *cultural politics* of anarchism and espoused the characteristics conventionally associated with vanguardism: the complete liberty of the artist, the search for the unknown, the artist as prophet or as a gifted genius who attempts to represent the future, the young rebel, the need to destroy the old and create a new spiritual language and open-ended form, the artist as victim and hero, and the reliance on neo-romantic inspiration.

As readers of Huidobro will readily note, most if not all these features are present in *Altazor*. In the context of my argument that means that after a twelve year gestation and upon its publication in 1931, Huidobro's most singularly poignant work represents the culmination of libertarian political influence and the crowning achievement of anarchist aesthetics in the Latin American context.<sup>4</sup> The fleeting references to that “only hope” that the

Russian revolution offers to the world in a moment of dire economic and social crisis—the crash of 1929—gives way to an artistic project that, in effect, subsumes anarchist doctrine only to divest it of its political significance. In other words, what triumphs after all is said and done is Huidobro's avant-gardist and aestheticist view. Only art, he seems to say, can save humanity from itself.

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

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

his own oligarchical background, would find some inspiration in that literature and its attendant organizations.

### The Allure of Anarchist Ideas

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

—Gonzalo Rojas (de Costa, *Vicente Huidobro* 273)

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

According to Henry Alfred Holmes, Huidobro's earliest introduction to anarchist ideas took place in meetings in high school, where these young students talked avidly about anarchism and the Russian revolution (Goic 29). By 1912, he was editor of *Musa Joven*, a journal inspired by *modernismo* that enabled Huidobro to establish connections with the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile—which had its own publication (*Juventud*), in which the young Pablo Neruda, among others published (Dawes, “Neruda” 319–36)—and the I.W.W. (Subercaseaux 116).<sup>7</sup> Anarchist and revolutionary texts and speeches, like the one delivered by the President of the Federación, Alejandro Quezada in 1911 undoubtedly influenced Huidobro. In his speech Quezada called for resistance against the “desaparición de la espontaneidad del alma” (disappearance of the spontaneity of the soul) and against the “culto del éxito” (the cult of success) and the “la aprobación ciega de todo lo que triunfe” (the blind approval of everything that triumphs). In responding to the admonitions that the youth be realistic and abandon its utopian dreams, he said: “¡No señores, el hombre es un ser que crea y produce, que fecunda y elabora y que al sentirse presionado en las estrecheces de la tierra quiere remontarse y llegar a las alturas!” (No, sir, man is a being that creates and produces, that fertilizes and elaborates and upon feeling pressured by the limits of the earthly wants to rise up and reach new heights) (Subercaseaux 47). Clearly, these and similar speeches by anarchists as well as their writings helped give Huidobro, if not the vocabulary for his *creacionismo*, at least some general indications of the directions his aesthetic theory and poetry might take. And even if Huidobro's association with the Federación was indirect, he had to have been affected by their political presence in Chile circa 1911–1912. “La bohemia estudiantil antioligárquica y el anarquismo (con participación de

obreros y artesanos)” (The anti-oligarchical student bohemians and anarchism [with the participation of workers and artisans]), remarks Bernardo Subercaseaux, “fue una marea ascendente, convirtiéndose en un destacado actor político y social junto al movimiento obrero en formación” (was a rising tide, becoming a major actor in politics and society along with the burgeoning labor movement) (48). “Era” (It was), continues Subercaseaux:

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

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

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

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

However, the cultural and political activity—though in a more subdued way—of the Federación and Huidobro’s association with it, heightened upon his return to Chile from France after a nine-year hiatus. Upon arriving in 1925, he founded *Acción*, with an evocative avant-gardist title and then ran for president of Chile supported by the Federación. Huidobro managed to get a few thousand votes and began making plans to return to France. Before doing so, he wrote *Vientos contrarios* (Contrary Winds, 1926), which, according to Cedomil Goic, shows that Huidobro’s life became “decididamente anárquico o más bien autárquico” (decidedly anarchic or rather autarchic) (51).

But what, then, of the intervening years in France? If anything these years reinforce the left-libertarian ideas Huidobro had in Chile. Quick to find the most salient figures in the art scene in Paris, he befriended Guillaume Apollinaire, Tristan Tzara, Max Jacob, André Breton, Juan Gris, Joan Miró, Hans Arp, and Pablo Picasso. As major players in the avant-garde, in their youth all of them were guided by anarchism. Yet it was particularly Apollinaire who had a decisive sway on both Huidobro's aesthetic and political views. Indeed, Apollinaire's notion of creating "new worlds"—of which the Chilean speaks most famously in "Arte poética"—parallels Huidobro's own efforts to design a separate aesthetic realm that would rival the technological and scientific achievements of the industrial revolution.<sup>8</sup> Like Apollinaire, Huidobro was an eclectic thinker who explored myriad avant-gardist styles, and relied on the "internal reality of imagination, instinct, dreams and intuition" in forging an individualist and anti-bourgeois view of art (Bates 69).<sup>9</sup> As Patricia Leighton has argued

For Apollinaire, as for Jarry and Picasso, outrageousness sufficed in its own right to push the frontiers of art forward into that unknown—but unquestionably better—future envisioned by the anarchist prophets. The path they were to follow was laid out by Kropotkin and, not contradictory to them, by Nietzsche and was already familiar to Picasso, Apollinaire, and Jarry in the 1890s: to love genius, to trust that inspiration speaks with a true voice, to reject and rise above the mediocrity of the bourgeois society which is death to art, and above all to embrace freedom—artistically, morally and politically. (59)

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

### ***Altazor*: An Anarchist Cultural Politics**

*Altazor*, of course, commonly regarded as an avant-gardist *tour de force* is also the fleshing out of Huidobro's own anarchist aesthetics. All the more so because writing it spanned twelve years (1919–1931), thus making it his

most representative poetic work regarding avant-gardist praxis. Responding to the devastating effects World War I had in Europe—and especially in France where he was living—, the economic crash of 1929, the dramatic technological inventions at the turn of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th and the breakdown of Huidobro's own religious faith, *Altazor* carves out a separate and redeeming place for poetry after displacing the crises the speaker faces and, more particularly, the radical politics insinuated in Canto I.

In the Preface there are no predicaments to encounter, rather it fulfills its archetypal role by introducing the speaker, who is a poet, magician and prophet—in the avant-gardist tradition—and who, as such, becomes “un pequeño Dios” (55–60) (a small God) and creates his own poetic world and ideal quest. “Un poema,” the speaker says, “es una cosa que nunca ha sido, que nunca podrá ser” (57) (A poem is a thing that never has been, and never will be). In the neo-Romantic tradition of the avant-garde, the speaker casts himself as hero who has a duty to offer spiritual nourishment—in an age bereft of it—via an unattainable Platonic ideal.<sup>10</sup> To accomplish this the speaker has to search out the Virgin, the muse, who will inspire him to imagine “new worlds.” Thanks to her, *Altazor*—Huidobro's alter ego—becomes a “gran poeta” (great poet) and a “profeta” (prophet) (58). Life, he lets the reader know, is a precarious and inexorable ride in a parachute to our final demise (59). Only the poet/magician/prophet can elevate the spirit and make us relish the antithetical “rosa de la muerte” (60) (rose of death). The Cantos that follow in succession map out this mission to save humanity from the impending fate it faces existentially, socio-politically and economically.

The most significant of these Cantos is the first one. For it is the only one that presents the reader with down-to-earth catastrophes associated—however indirectly at times—with World War I, the dehumanization during the industrial revolution, the Russian revolution, the Great Depression and lastly, the alienation that results from all this. In other words, it portrays the existential quagmire in which the speaker finds himself only to then give way in the following Cantos to the exploration of poetic language in a celestial, sublime background (Concha 285–86). In the opening lines, reminiscent of a soliloquy, *Altazor* addresses himself and the terrible misfortunes he has faced. He has lost his “primera serenidad” (first serenity)—presumably when he was a believer—and the loss of his faith has subjected him to “angustia” (anguish), “el terror de ser” (a fear of being), “vientos de dolor” (winds of pain), and solitude. Worst of all, he senses that he lives but is not really living (“vives y no te ves vivir”) (61). The tormented speaker, then, faces a vast universe and a world where “No hay bien no hay mal ni verdad ni orden ni belleza” (There is no good no bad nor truth nor order nor beauty) and knows full well that “morirás Se secará tu voz y serás / invisible / La Tierra seguirá girando sobre su órbita precisa”

(62) (you will die Your voice will dry up and you will be / invisible / The Earth will continue revolving on its precise orbit). Alienated from his fellow human beings and from himself, what is left but to write about the very crisis that is destroying him? And so “caer” (to fall) is the only alternative that allows him to accept his lack of faith (“limpia tu cabeza de prejuicio y moral”) (62) (cleanse your head of prejudice and morality) and live up to the worn but reliable creed of *carpe diem*.

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

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

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

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



However, in the following improbable stanza, part of which was certainly written in 1919, the speaker addresses the enormous tragedy of World War I and offers a succinct solution:

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

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

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

How can we explain this paradox? Because the evidence is scant, I can only conjecture that the first lines cited above were indeed written in 1919 but the remaining lines were written later, close to the publication date

(1931). For as noted up to now, Huidobro was influenced by anarchism and was interested in the Russian revolution as far back as his late teens, but it was not until around 1930 that he began to call himself a communist and claimed at least that he was a member.<sup>11</sup> And it was at that stage that one would expect him to offer socialist revolution as an answer. Although it is conceivable that as an anarchist in, say, 1919 he might have endorsed revolutionary change, his newspaper and journal articles do not show any sign of that kind of political stance. At any rate, the fact remains that the grand solution incarnated in the Bolshevik revolution or anything resembling it does not make its way back into *Altazor*. From this moment on, once the speaker has overcome the anguish and despair, the revolution becomes *poetic*.

One could argue that the rest of Canto I deals in an almost Bloomian or Eliot-like manner with the poet's struggle with his abilities, the poetic Tradition, his precursors, and, as Octavio Paz puts it, the poet's "other voice." *Altazor*'s answer is: "Canta el caos al caos por todo el universo" (67) (Sing the chaos to chaos throughout the universe), that is, in an archetypically avant-gardist vein, reflect the disorder left by the end of World War I and industrialization of society in form, in language. As a consummate experimentalist, Huidobro proceeds apace with his goal to break poetic structure and language down completely, which he achieves in Canto VII. And he can also avail himself of prototypical avant-gardist techniques: arbitrary associations, the exaltation of metaphor, simultaneity, syntactical disruptions, sudden illogical ties between images, neologisms, the creation of visual images via poetry, and so on.<sup>12</sup> While doing so, Huidobro advocates "Consumamos el placer / Agotemos la vida en la vida" (67) (Let's consume pleasure / We exhaust life in life). An attempt at questioning the boundaries between life and art in typical avant-gardist fashion no doubt,<sup>13</sup> this *carpe diem* resonates very well with anarchism's "aesthetic individualism." Following this path, Huidobro creates a separate artistic realm that will not be as weighed down by the very impasses the speaker faced in the beginning of Canto I:

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

(Liberation, Oh yes liberation from everything  
From our memory that possesses us  
From the profound viscera that know what they know  
Due to those wounds that tie us down in the end  
And break the cries of wings.)

The search for uninhibited liberation leads Altazor to formulate his own response to the anguish and emptiness in the air at this historical moment:

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

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

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

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

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

On the one hand, then, in a neoromantic way the speaker aims to recreate Rubén Darío's “sed de cielo” (thirst for the heavens), thus reaffirming the philosophically idealist affinity between *modernismo* and *creacionismo*.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, he is very much the avant-gardist who scrutinizes, alters and distrusts language (80), who only wants to give the reader a “música del espíritu” (81) (music of the spirit). Both of these positions fuse into one as they are expressed—in vintage Huidobrian manner—in two lines in the denouement of Canto I: “La palabra electrizada de sangre y corazón / Es el gran paracaídas y el pararrayos de Dios” (83) (The electricized word of blood and heart / Is God's great parachute and lightning rod). The modern invocation of technology dovetails here with his neoromantic poetic and spiritual quest. In other words, poetry and spirituality return to satisfy the immense void left by the calamities at the beginning of the Canto.

### Establishing a Creationist Poetics

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

And thanks to her Altazor can break with poetic traditions and carry out the experimentalism in the remaining Cantos, which I will touch upon briefly. The third Canto borrows references from the modern city to jolt the reader into considering different word associations. Consider, for instance, the following line: “El mar es un tejado de botellas” (93) (The sea is a roof of bottles). Here Huidobro is relying upon a series of connections the reader will perhaps make. Given the Chilean context, the bottles are likely green and empty but they formerly contained wine. It also suggests that the viewer shares the great pleasure of gazing at the sea with someone else, much as s/he would share a bottle of wine with someone. Moreover, compared to a rooftop the bottles emulate the green, glittering waves in the Pacific Ocean. In this and countless other examples Huidobro uses what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson call an “idiosyncratic conceptual metaphor” to create a “new

world” to be sure, but also to simply have the readers step outside of their conventional way of conceiving things (50). For Huidobro, as he remarks in Canto III, this endeavor becomes a “sport” or a “game” (97) played, once again, in the celestial domain: “Combate singular entre el pecho y el cielo / Total desprendimiento al fin de voz de carne / Eco de luz que sangra aire sobre el aire” (98) (Singular battle between breast and sky / Complete detachment finally from the voice of flesh / Echo of light that bleeds aire upon air). And this leads to silence, to nothing.

Thus the urgent need to retreat to his muse in Canto IV in order to wage poetic battle against the emptiness. Using more conventional metaphors because, we infer, he was unable to sustain the experimentation, Ximena is depicted as a nurse “de sombras y distancias / Yo vuelvo a ti huyendo del reino incalculable / De ángeles prohibidos por el amanecer” (99) (of shadows and distances / I return to you fleeing the incalculable kingdom / Of angels prohibited by the dawn). Altazor seeks refuge from the various angels that haunted him in Canto I and, as such, kept him immersed in his misery. The metaphorical eye in the hurricane, the stability amidst chaos, or his muse’s eyes (the proverbial window of the soul, love) give him the motivation to continue his creative game (beginning on page 101). As readers of Huidobro know, he then turns to the intersection between painting and poetry in a way analogous to the “poèmes dessins” or the “visible lyricism” of Apollinaire to create a landscape with the suffixes of words after transposing suffixes and prefixes in earlier lines (105).<sup>15</sup> Using Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer’s famous romantic reference to the “dark swallows,” and appending suffixes to “golon-” —the first part of “golondrina” (swallow)— Huidobro portrays a scene in which a child in the Orient does pirouettes and sings presumably among birds during the day, thus celebrating the concert between music, the visual arts and linguistic innovation.<sup>16</sup> This experiment, as well as another shortly thereafter with the musical scale sandwiched in between the same prefixes and suffixes (106), mark the most unusual formal transformations in Canto IV and they indicate the direction and relative unity—the unity of fragments one might say—of his project to this point: “Darse prisa darse prisa / Están prontas las semillas / Esperando una orden para florecer” (107) (Hurry hurry / The seeds are ready / Waiting for order to flower).

After these passages, Altazor plays with internal rhythm and alliteration as he describes individuals who have passed away and also announces his own demise: “Aquí yace Altazor azor fulminado por la altura / Aquí yace Vicente Huidobro antipoeta y mago” (108) (Here lies Altazor goshawk fulminated by the heights / Here lies Vicente Huidobro antipoet and magician). Like the mythic Icarus, then, Altazor seems to have met his fate for having dared to reach the highest of heights, yet he awaits resurrection in order to continue his verbal battle against the void (108–09). Indeed, he

seems to have perceived a way out at the end of the poem. He must look for the lowest common denominator that can still provide rhythm and musicality, the pillars of poetry (110).

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

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

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

Two conclusions come to mind regarding Canto VII and therefore *Altazor* per se. Either Huidobro’s avant-gardist task has been to destroy in

order to create, or recreate, or he has reached an ideal realm expressed only via the musicality of vowels and attained at this metaphysical level only by relying at least in part on the physical. Sounding out the vowels at the beginning we are reminded of two lovers in the throes of lovemaking who achieve climax at the very end of Canto VII, thus confirming the connection with *Temblor de cielo*, also published in 1931, which outlined sex and sexuality as the life goal of human beings.<sup>17</sup> *Altazor*, then, never really concludes because its denouement is regeneration and re-creation. The liberation of language, then, goes hand in hand with sexual liberation, and revolution and social change in general vanish. One is left then with a ludic game that ostensibly fills the empty space left by socio-historical, political, economic and personal crises. Or put another way: in the face of those social calamities, in a gesture which we would not hesitate to describe as “the personal is political,” only the realms of language exploration and intimate sexuality can be salvaged in a world in which, seemingly, “There is no good there is no bad nor truth nor order nor / beauty” (62).

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

But what then of those few poems—“España,” “URSS,” “Policías y soldados” and “Elegía a la muerte de Lenin” (“Spain,” “USSR,” “Police and Soldiers” and “Elegy to the Death of Lenin”)—written in the mid 30s which seem to signal a break with aestheticism? Although certainly not negligible, two things stand out. First, they are not representative of Huidobro’s work even in the 30s, rather they are anomalies which appear in small segments of his narrative and poetry.<sup>18</sup> Second, and more importantly, the overall view continues to be aestheticist. Huidobro heralds Lenin in his elegy, for instance, as a heroic individual figure who has initiated a “new era,” has sung the “song of the multitudes,” and has illuminated human beings thanks to his “words” and his “language.”<sup>19</sup> It is difficult not to see this too, as

Enrique Lihn puts it, as “su fervor romántico por los grandes destinos humanos individuales” (378) (his romantic fervor for the great individual human destinies) and nothing more, or, at best, an *aestheticist* interpretation of Lenin and his role in the Russian revolution. Consequently, even in these socially motivated poems, Huidobro’s Modernist inclinations hold supreme and the socio-political events that inspired them fade into the background, thus confirming the primacy of the liberal aesthetic in his work.

## Notes

1. This and all translations to English in this essay are mine.
2. This is the thesis of my forthcoming book, *Poetas ante la modernidad: Vallejo, Huidobro, Neruda y Paz* (Editorial Fundamentos).
3. Bernardo Subercaseaux, *Genealogía de la vanguardia en Chile* (47–49), and Nelson Osorio, “Para una caracterización histórica del vanguardismo literario hispanoamericano” (227–54).
4. For more on the notion of “anarchist aesthetics” see Egbert and especially André Reszler’s *La estética anarquista*.
5. Cappelletti maintains that anarchism’s impact can be felt as late as 1933, whereas Alba argues—in *Historia del movimiento obrero en América Latina* (100)—that its influence wanes by 1931.
6. See Gabriel Salazar, Arturo Mancilla, Carlos Durán, *Historia contemporánea de Chile: Estado, legitimidad, ciudadanía* (40–41, 65, 71), and Nelson Osorio, “Literatura de postguerra: renovación y vanguardia” (121–23). The central evidence that solidified the opposition to oligarchical rule was the “Reforma Universitaria” in 1918.
7. Regarding the ties between *Musa Joven* and the Federación de Estudiantes. As regards the connection between the I.W.W. and the Federación, see Cappelletti, LXXXVIII–LXXXIX.
8. On Apollinaire’s effect on Huidobro see Teitelboim’s account (58–64, 72–74).
9. See also Jerod Siegel, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830–1930* (348) and Patricia Leighton, *Re-ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897–1914* (53).
10. On heroism and the avantgardist see Poggioli (66).
11. Huidobro’s affiliation with the French—and, for that matter, Chilean—Communist Party is unresolved. René de Costa says that he probably joined or at least claimed that he joined between 1929 and 1931 (*Huidobro: Careers of a Poet* 108); Jaime Concha in *Vicente Huidobro* alleges that he struck “poses de comunista” (poses as a Communist) and that his self-affirmation as Communist was also “el colmo de su individualismo” (13, 80) (the height of his individualism); and Volodia Teitelboim, former Secretary General of the Communist Party in Chile and biographer of Huidobro asserts that the poet joined the French Communist Party in 1930 like many intellectuals of the period (*Huidobro: la marcha infinita* 156). See also my article on Huidobro’s political and aesthetic beliefs, “Huidobro: entre el esteticismo vanguardista y la izquierda” (41–56).
12. For more on this see Hugo Verani, “Las vanguardias literarias en Hispanoamérica”; Federico Schopf, “El vanguardismo poético en Hispanoamérica,” and, more generally, Renato Poggioli’s *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*.



13. As Peter Bürger points out, this happens as art—beginning with Aestheticism—claims its independence from its duty to reproduce the events in social life and from the institution of art per se. See especially, “The Avant-garde as the Self-Criticism of Art in Bourgeois Society” (20–27).
14. René de Costa maintains correctly that Huidobro did not cleanly break with *modernismo*, but rather thought out his *creacionismo* in part based on the aesthetic precepts of the former. Consult his “Del modernismo a la vanguardia: el creacionismo pre-polémico” (261–74). Darío’s “sed de cielo” appears in “Yo soy aquel” in *Azul . . . Cantos de vida y esperanza* (339–43).
15. As is well known, the avant-gardists wanted to “do away with the dividing lines between the arts, the division of architecture and sculpture, poetry and the plastic arts,” Miklós Szabolcsi, “Avant-garde, Neo-avant-garde, Modernism: Questions and Suggestions” (56). On “visible lyricism” see Poggioli (133–34).
16. See Bécquer’s “LIIP” in *Rimas y leyendas* (39–40).
17. I owe this insight to two graduate students whom I would like to thank: David Young and Dalton Moss. René de Costa has argued that *Temblor de cielo* is fundamentally about sexual liberation. See his commentary in *Vicente Huidobro: poesía y política (1911–1948)*, antología comentada por René de Costa (165–66).
18. In “Vicente Huidobro y la literatura social,” David Bary alleges in his study of Huidobro’s narrative and poetry that there was a turn toward commitment from the 1930s on, but he also acknowledges that Huidobro’s worldview was “anarquismo personal y aristocrático” (personal and aristocratic anarchism, 322). Moreover, he concedes that the social poems are a very few with respect to his poetic opus.
19. *Literatura chilena en el exilio* (19). Also available on the web: [www.memoriachilena.cl/archivos2/pdfs/MC0005287.pdf](http://www.memoriachilena.cl/archivos2/pdfs/MC0005287.pdf)

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