

PRO(BL)EM: THE PARADOX OF GENRE
IN THE LITERARY RENOVATION OF
THE SPANISH AMERICAN
POEMA EN PROSA

NATALIA RITA GIANNINI

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by
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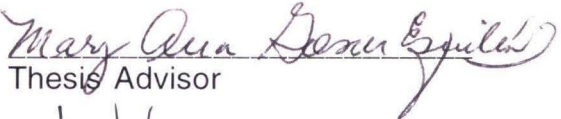
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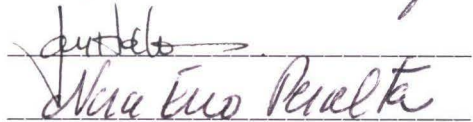
by


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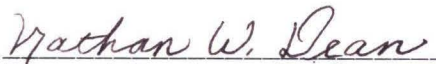




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Abstract

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The poema en prosa originates in the Romantic subversion of discursive boundaries, as a problematic genre that foregrounds its theoretical self-questioning. Through its confrontation of prose and poetry, and the paradoxical affirmation of a form that results from the dialogic struggle between them, the poema en prosa is able to create an alternative space for Spanish American writers conditioned by a colonial history of literary borrowings from other traditions. This counter-discursive entity attracted turn-of-the-century modernistas such as Julián del Casal and Rubén Darío, as did the prose experiments of José Martí. Delineating an autochthonous discursive identity for Spanish America through Romantic ideology, Martí anticipates the renovating social and aesthetic ideals of the poema en prosa. His search for a paradoxically original Spanish American expression helps establish the theoretical parameters for later modernistas and postmodernistas, who resort to the poema en prosa as an ambiguous means of creative autonomy.

Por mi familia

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Introduction

Two Precursors of the poema en prosa:

A Chimerical Ambition

“ 'Tis a pity that rhime is not sanctioned by law;
'For 'twould really be serving us all, to impose
a capital fine on a man who spoke prose.’ ”¹

Spanish American poetry derives in part from, but has always challenged, European literary traditions. The Spanish American poema en prosa, in particular, constitutes both a reinterpretation of its older European models and a new, wide-ranging, and vigorous field of exploration for “New World” writers. Inseparable from the literary experiments taking place in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany and France, the poema en prosa in Spanish America begins as a typically imitative discourse in the former colonies seeking freedom from preestablished, imposed forms. The flexibility and renewing capacity of this form, with its problematic generic status which has never been precisely defined, becomes a means toward exploration and reaffirmation of Spanish American discursive identity. Nevertheless, due to its hybrid and relatively illegitimate position, the poema en prosa has hardly been given attention in the context of the turn-of-the-century renovation of Spanish American discourse, nor has its subversive intermediacy been considered in terms of the transition toward a more authentic expression in the subcontinent.²

The contemporary poema en prosa is the culmination of the aesthetic innovations of modernista and postmodernista poets, who long sought to surpass their European models and develop their own modes of poetic affirmation.

The poema en prosa emerges in Spanish America when, discovering their own potential, modernistas such as José Martí (1853-1895), Julián del Casal (1863-1893), and Rubén Darío (1867-1916) have the confidence to search for a voice to actualize their own expressive needs. Because of their centuries-long recourse to European literary canons, which had created an amalgam of borrowed voices and modes in the New World, Spanish American poets were, at the end of the nineteenth century, in a position to undertake a different expression, reflective of a desire to configure their poetic identity in a form ideally without a past. Perhaps the first true effort at aesthetic self-determination, the current of modernismo constituted the foundational literature of Spanish America. Due to its ground-breaking innovations, later postmodernistas such as Pedro Prado (1886-1952), Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957), José Antonio Ramos Sucre (1890-1930), Alfonsina Storni (1892-1938), Juana de Ibarbourou (1895-1979), and Pablo Neruda (1904-1973), were able, early in the century, to practice the paradoxically new form of the poema en prosa. They attained an unprecedented degree of rhetorical and formal freedom, enabling them to explore literary expression, relatively on the margins of tradition. The inherent ambiguity of the poema en prosa, as an ideal form that amalgamated prose and poetry, provided Spanish American poets with the possibility of conceiving a poetic expression without European, particularly Spanish, discursive connotations.

Just as the French Symbolists felt the burden of their inherited lyrical

language, which seemed to them so overused that it had ceased to have poetic meaningfulness, the Spanish American poets had the double task of renovating a language that had never been completely their own.³

Aesthetically and politically representative of Spain, the standard language of the former colonies was a problematic means towards discursive independence. It had not originated in Spanish America, and had only slightly changed in contact with various Amerindian and African languages. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Cuban Julián del Casal took a deliberate step toward literary renovation when he translated into Spanish a few of Baudelaire's prose poems from the posthumous Le Spleen de Paris: *Petits poèmes en prose* (1869), which gave the form its name.⁴ Baudelaire acknowledged being directly influenced by Aloysius Bertrand's *Gaspard de la Nuit* (written in 1827 and published posthumously in 1842), which originated the *poema en prosa* in the West (Bernard 50). Baudelaire thus explored a new form of expression, far from the strict versification system which already had been challenged by such Romantics as Victor Hugo. The French Symbolist was soon followed by such poets as Stéphane Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud; the latter's *Illuminations* (written between 1872 and 1873) is considered a masterpiece of the genre.⁵

Encouraged by his translations of Baudelaire, Julián del Casal created his own "Pequeños poemas en prosa," where he captured the elusiveness of instantaneous sensory impressions, emulating the japoniste "imagism" which Ezra Pound and his followers would later formalize into an aesthetic creed. His *poema en prosa* "Japonería" (1887), borrowing from Baudelaire's taste for exotic and mystical realms, unifies aesthetically the human and the material, in what constitutes a recurrent gesture of the modernista Spanish American

poema en prosa toward a supernatural realm:⁶

Dentro del escaparate de una tienda, lleno de brazaletes de oro, esmaltados de zafiros y rubíes, que fulguraban en sus estuches de terciopelo azul; de rosarios de coral engarzados en plata que se enroscaban en sus conchas nacaradas, y de lámparas de alabastro con pantallas de seda rosada que aguardaban la noche para abrir sus pupilas amarillas, he visto esta mañana, al salir de paseo, un búcaro japonés digno de figurar en tu alcoba blanca ¡oh, espiritual María! donde no se han oído nunca las pisadas de tus admiradores o el eco sonoro de los besos sensuales.

Sobre el esmalte verde nilo, filetado de oro, que cubría el barro del búcaro japonés, se destacaba una Quimera de ojazos garzos, iluminados por el deseo de lo prohibido, de cabellera rubia destrenzada, por las espaldas; de alas de pedrería, ansiosas de remontarse; y de dedos de uñas largas enrojecidas de carmín, deseando alcanzar, con el impulso de la desesperación, una florecilla azul de corazón de oro, abierta en la cumbre de un monte nevado sin poderlo conseguir.

Y al mirar el búcaro japonés, he sentido el deseo de ofrecértelo, para que lo coloques en tu alcoba blanca ¡oh, lánguida María! donde no se han oído nunca las pisadas de tus adoradores o el eco sonoro de los besos sensuales; porque tu destino, como el de una Quimera, te ha condenado a perseguir un ideal, tan alto y tan bello, que no podrás alcanzar jamás. (145)

Aside from the refrain that appears in the first and last paragraphs, there is

nothing in this text to indicate that it is a poem, except its classification as a poema en prosa. Casal is the first Spanish American poet to take on the task of employing a self-consciously new form, and yet it is formally undistinguishable from a prose fragment.⁷ However, on closer inspection, this text's compact imagery and loosely-threaded narrative become evident, as well as its predominant concentration on objects, rather than characters or plot. In fact, the most striking characteristics of Casal's poema en prosa are its lack of narrative direction and its emphasis on the aesthetic ambiguity between reality and fiction: between the woman, named María, and the Chimera. Instead of giving primacy to the woman, the fragmented imagery of the text gives life and consistency to the Chimera, which the speaker identifies in a Japanese vase among the intricate curiosities of a display window. The excessive beauty of the Chimera is offered among a series of lavish pieces that can only be admired or possessed; the text does not attempt to legitimize a "real" object but a deliberately "false" and deceptive one. For the speaker, the Chimera is thus more real than the supposed object of his desire. The atmosphere of the poema en prosa seems solidified with impersonal descriptions that subdue the female figure into an unapproachable object, relegated to her white room, where she cannot live out the unachievable "ideal" of the Chimera.

This mythical figure embodies an unearthly temptress; however, a Chimera also represents a monster and a fictional or unreal conception usually associated with an unrealistic but desirable utopia. It is therefore comparable to the aim of the poema en prosa, which has the reassuring appearance of prose, while embodying a poeticalness that is intangible. Thus a poem within prose is like the utopia contained in an improbable medium--the explicitly artificial vase. The poema en prosa is Chimerical in the sense that it appears to

be what it is not. The speaker's underlying preference for the Chimera suggests that, like the genre's reliance on a deliberately self-conscious discourse, he needs the deception and artificiality of the Chimera to be aesthetically fulfilled. Contained within prose, but advertised as a poem, Casal's text emphasizes its own artificiality. The simultaneously aesthetic and erotic pleasure of the Chimera, whose painted eyes are "iluminados por el deseo de lo prohibido," further underlines the indefinite position of the genre, which employs a self-referential medium to point toward an unattainable plenitude--an "ideal" that is neither fictional nor real. The oscillation between the Chimera and the woman, or between discourse and reality, conditions the poema en prosa to an irremediable insufficiency.

This poema en prosa, like Casal's Chimera, is therefore a deceptive "representation" of an inexistent or unattainable referent: put forth as prose, its discourse presupposes a legitimacy and coherence that is ultimately unachievable through a form which undermines its own discursive boundaries. The genre is thus a "monstre nonviable" (Bernard 10) that defies its own medium; a utopia that promises, like the painted temptress, an impossible fulfillment. Through the fantastic license of the genre, which the ambiguity of the Chimera itself represents, primacy is given to the aesthetic richness of empty objects--the vase, a lamp shade, a sea shell, a jewelry case--rather than to linear identities and narratives. The prevailing allusion to aesthetically beautiful but hollow forms alludes to the deceptiveness of the language of this poema en prosa, which is as explicitly artificial as the Chimera. Lacking any plot, Casal's text depends on the passive perceptions of the speaker, who is transfixed by a purely visual experience: "Y al mirar el búcaro japonés, he sentido el deseo de ofrecértelo." Rather than offering love, the speaker offers

the woman an empty vase which only possesses a representation of the ideal, alluding to the preeminent rhetoricity of prose as a void and deceptive structure. The apparent cohesiveness and closure of prose covers up the essential emptiness of discourse--the ultimate Chimera, or deceit, of language and rhetoric. This preference for objects or empty forms that enact the precariousness of poetic discourse will be a consistent image throughout this study of the Spanish American poema en prosa. The Chimerical ambition of a self-evidently fictional space will be a motif in the analysis of postmodernista and contemporary poemas en prosa.

The shift of Casal's poema en prosa between extremes--reality and fiction, woman and Chimera, and poetry and prose (presupposed by the name of the genre itself)--creates a play of receding identities in which each subject attempts to be something else: the speaker admires the woman, who in turn admires the Chimera, while neither the speaker, the woman, nor the Chimera can reach the "florezilla azul de corazón de oro," ultimately the object of their desire. This gesture of misplaced gaze and unattainable correspondence is another characteristic trait of the genre. Unable to be "itself," the poema en prosa aims beyond its own medium: it is, as Jonathan Monroe describes it, "a genre that does not want to be itself" (15); a problematic form that resists being limited to its discursive classification. Casal's text reveals the insufficiency of the poema en prosa for reaching the ideal that is frozen in the Japanese vase. The intermediate status of the genre intrinsically foregrounds these self-conscious mechanisms of representation, forcing it into an eschewed self-referentiality like that of the woman who must see her own insufficiency reflected in the image of the Chimera. Like this text that centers on a Chimera that is superior to reality, the genre points to its unachievable independence

from preestablished forms--its indivisibility from a precarious vase or unreliable discourse.

Presupposing with Tzvetan Todorov that each literary text constitutes a transgression of its genre ("Literary Genres" 193-94), the poema en prosa, unlike other texts, presents itself as being distinctly self-conscious of its own contingency as a definite form: "The prose poem is, first and foremost, a mode of discourse that speaks against itself in the very act of defining itself," confirms Monroe (17). It is a form constructed out of the negation of the boundaries between genres, and it is therefore self-denying by its own denomination. Like the Chimera that is constrained within the vase, and the woman restricted to her room, the speaker of Casal's poema en prosa describes a reality that is bound to its own fixed means of expression--prose--, while intrinsically questioning its boundaries. This is achieved by the text's tight symbiosis of life-like artistic objects with lifeless "real" objects, which prevents either realm from achieving primacy. Unlike other texts which automatically fall into a specific category, the poema en prosa declares itself a Chimerical hybrid. Neither prose nor poetry, it is sustained on the alternation between one "form" and the other. As in most of the examples that will be examined, Casal's poema en prosa precludes definite subject/object relations and creates such duplicitous identities as that of the enigmatic Chimera, whose referential function shifts from aesthetic object to transcendental subject within the text. Linear plots are secondary to Casal's disjointed narrative; its promise of a realm outside of the constraints of discourse corresponds to a description of the genre by Suzanne Bernard, who sees it as a form outside of form: ". . . puisque aussi bien ce pouvoir de la poésie se situe au-delà du langage? Ajoutons à cela que le poème en prose, genre protégée, nous déconcerte par son polymorphisme" (9). This mutable

character of the genre will be realized by subsequent generations of writers through an increasingly hermetic language.

Prose occupied a primary place in the emergence of the modernista movement to which Casal belonged, which “reflected a dissatisfaction with the restrictive Spanish poetics of the day, a longing for cultural autonomy, and a desire to achieve a sense of equality with the great cultures of Western Europe” (Jrade 7). The first literary innovations in Spanish America occurred significantly in the prose writings of such figures as Rubén Darío, and not in lyric (Anderson Imbert 39). Darío, the leading innovator of modernismo, claims to have written the first Spanish poemas en prosa in his famous collection Azul..., published in 1888 (Fernández 46), which is made up mostly of short prose pieces, ambiguously termed “cuentos” or short stories and poemas en prosa. Although Darío’s Azul... was undoubtedly one of the most influential books in Spanish America, Casal had already published his “Pequeños poemas en prosa” one year earlier (Fernández 46). It is nevertheless significant that Darío’s search for a “blue space” that would transcend reality and “take Spanish American discourse out of its limited and anachronistic present” (Jrade 37) deliberately makes use of a form between genres, such as the one he attempts through the unspecificity of the poema en prosa.

The poema en prosa “El ideal,” from Darío’s revolutionary Azul..., begins, like Casal’s “Japonería,” with a description of objects that achieve life-like status:

Y luego, una torre de marfil, una flor mística, una estrella a
quien enamorar... Pasó, la vi como quien viera un alba, huyente,
rápida, implacable.

Era una estatua antigua con un alma que se asomaba a los

ojos, ojos angelicales, todos ternura, todos cielo, todos enigma.

Sintió que la besaba con mis miradas y me castigó con la majestad de su belleza, y me vió como una reina y como una paloma. Pero pasó arrebatadora, triunfante, como una visión que deslumbra. Y yo, el pobre pintor de la Naturaleza y de Psychis, hacedor de ritmos y de castillos aéreos, vi el vestido luminoso del hada, la estrella de su diadema, y pensé en la promesa ansiada del amor hermoso. Mas de aquel rayo supremo y fatal sólo quedó en el fondo de mi cerebro un rostro de mujer, un sueño azul.

(104)

As Casal's "Japonería," "El ideal" humanizes an artistic creation, in this case a statue. Like the ambiguous Chimera, which has "ojazos garzos, iluminados por el deseo de lo prohibido," the statue's "soul" is reflected through her "ojos angelicales . . . todos enigma." She is both woman and statue, reality and fiction, like this poema en prosa which oscillates between assertion and negation of its own means of expression: thus all that can be claimed of the statue is a "sueño azul." The text relies on indefinite identities: the statue, which has "soul," is both "reina" and "paloma"; it is a "rayo supremo," an "hada," "una torre de marfil, una flor mística, una estrella a quien enamorar." Like the Chimera the woman must emulate, the statue represents "el ideal," a fleeting vision that seems only attainable in fiction, parallel to the evasive "florequilla azul" in Casal's vase. The text cannot approximate this vision which is beyond the poet's discourse; he is a simple "pintor de la Naturaleza y de Psychis, hacedor de ritmos y de castillos aéreos." For the poet's limited medium, "el ideal" can only be a fleeting consciousness--"huyente, rápida, implacable,"--as expressed by the visual image of her "luminous dress." He can only create

“rhythms” and “aerial castles,” signaling the superficiality of his attempts at representing her mutability. His narrative is about something self-consciously fictional, a statue whose aesthetic traits come to represent nothing more than a “blue dream.” Casal’s and Darío’s poemas en prosa embody the self-defeating gesture of this genre, which exposes its precariousness through an ambiguous allusion to an eternally displaced realm of correspondences. The marked artificiality of both the Chimera and the statue alludes to the genre’s self-conscious subversion of its own discursive reliability--its Chimerical ambition of self-transcendence through a form that, at least theoretically, can be neither itself nor another.

Any incursion into the theoretical implications of the intersection of poetry and prose of the poema en prosa must deal necessarily with the generalized tendency, since Romanticism, and more markedly since the latter part of the nineteenth century, of this shift in the conception of literature and its defining boundaries. The sudden appearance of the poema en prosa as an autonomous genre requires a multiplicity of inquiries that are at the core of literary theory: What constitutes literary language? What is lyricism? What gives the poema en prosa its poeticalness or poeticity? Why is it different from poetic prose? These are questions that deal precisely with the uneasiness of poets at the turn of the century, who were unwilling to accept the preconceived rhetorical and theoretical limitations of a language that had become predictable, and who were beginning to question the very way language worked, as a means of poetic expression.

This transgressive notion of the poema en prosa is inseparable from the radical artistic movements that followed the first exponents of this uneasiness, the Symbolists, and the multiplicity of “-isms” associated with the French avant-

garde. The literary experiments of Dadaists and Surrealists were as revolutionary in outlook as the appearance of the new genre: they were part of a general tendency, inherited from Romanticism, to aim paradoxically at transcending language (Beaujour 41-42). The poema en prosa was consequently an appealing means of lyrical creation through a decontextualized rhetorical system that could be explored and questioned. For such poets as Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Claudel, Paul Reverdy, Max Jacob, André Breton, and Francis Ponge, the poema en prosa constituted a means for subverting their own modes of expression through a form that was still undefined. This resulted in the necessity, throughout the twentieth century, of consistently attempting to define the elusive characteristics of this “genre protégé.” The only qualities that seem to differentiate the poema en prosa are its brevity and its thematic concentration or unity (Fernández 33; Bernard 15). A more workable description provides the following definition: “Même narrative, la forme se caractérise par la discontinuité systématique du discours (discontinuité interne ou externe), par une écriture en fragments clos sur eux-mêmes: moments, anecdotes, morales, emblèmes ou devises, portraits...” (Désirat et al. 2421). The poema en prosa, then, should be described in terms of its internal characteristics, rather than its explicit formal features, in order to highlight the distinctiveness of its elusive boundaries and its radically subjective, rather than formally conventional generic status. A more noticeable characteristic that distinguished it from other forms, at least at the end of the nineteenth century, was its use of colloquial and sometimes vulgar language. The poema en prosa was, after all, intended by Bertrand and Baudelaire to be emblematic of modernity, and they injected it with dialogue and with a marked element of orality (Désirat et al. 2422).

The poema en prosa is not only a genre that gives voice to relegated subjects (such as Darío's opposition of society's rich and poor in "La canción del oro" [Azul... 57], or Baudelaire's similar device in "Assommons les pauvres" [Petits poèmes en prose 214]), which evinces "extraordinary preoccupation with the prosaic world of everyday objects," considered a defining characteristic of the form (Monroe 10). It is itself a genre that has been marginal throughout its history. Unlike the established modern genres, which had been chiefly defined by formal considerations (poetry by meter and rhyme, drama by dialogue, the novel by length and narrativity), the poema en prosa revealed the contingency of discursive categories that presupposed a distinction between form and content, as well as between the tight metrical system of poetry and the relatively formal flexibility of prose. But this form, as critics of the poema en prosa have repeatedly confirmed, is a genre.⁸ Here lies its inexhaustible appeal for Spanish American writers: it is an established form that is in large measure illegitimate, since it is superficially undifferentiated from prose. This is a paradoxical genre that is new by means of its hybridization of other genres, rather than by any distinct characteristic. Thus to understand what makes it different, the poema en prosa must be understood beyond its objective formal features, as a form in which expressive renovation is carried out by theoretical subversiveness. Its poeticalness must be defined by the internal conditions that constitute it. This conception of an unformalized poetic element, which can be traced back to the Romantics, challenges the categorical Aristotelian thinking of Western tradition and generates a rather reconstituted poetics that relies on a subjective kind of meaningfulness. Thus for Paz, "el romanticismo fue ante todo una interiorización de la visión poética . . . la ruptura de la estética objetiva y más bien impersonal de la tradición latina y la aparición del yo del poeta

como realidad primordial” (Los hijos 95). Michel Beaujour takes this Romantic transcendence of formal traits one step further by asserting that “the focus on prose poems signals the poet’s more or less conscious choice of a poetics derived from the quasi-theological belief that ‘poetic language’ is ontologically--rather than formally--different from ordinary language” (52). The poet must have the intention of creating a poema en prosa that is above genres; the text is thus marked by a will to define itself in terms of contradictory formal conventions.⁹ This is perhaps why the term “Proem,” first coined by Ponge in his 1948 collection of prose poems entitled Proèmes, is so fitting, pointing to the hybrid qualities that make it an inherently problematic construction, paradoxically aware of the forms that give rise to it.

Casal and Darío were similarly conscious of their role as renovators of the tradition. They were attempting “to find a language with which to reply to the Spanish America that was taking place at the time” (Jrade 29); like other modernista authors, they “struggled with the dominant poetic and prosaic modes of discourse in their attempt to find their own voice. This founding effort was simultaneously aesthetic and political” (9). In their search for a new expression, both were influenced by the Cuban José Martí, arguably the best-known writer of the time, who fought and wrote for a political and aesthetic revolution in Spanish America. Also a Cuban, Casal must have been especially aware of Martí’s awakening of the continent to its own potential: “Martí not only sought to make a revolution through his words but he also hoped to revolutionize language itself, making it more American and receptive to modern times and, perhaps more importantly, to the future” (Jrade 25). Forging a politically and aesthetically independent Spanish America, Martí tried to find a world view on which to found these changes, and he was deeply

influenced by the Romantic flight from contingent rhetorical boundaries. It is revealing that modernismo, the movement he initiated, actualized the Romantic program.

Modernismo was, for Octavio Paz, the true Romanticism of Spanish America, beginning in the latter decades of the nineteenth century: “El modernismo fue nuestro verdadero romanticismo y, como en el caso del simbolismo francés, su versión no fue una repetición sino una metáfora: otro romanticismo” (Los hijos 128). Paz contradicts the previously predominant view that Romanticism had had a long history in the subcontinent through the theoretical programs of such writers as the Argentinean Esteban Echeverría (1805-1851), whose study of August Wilhelm Schlegel and Mme. de Staël was considered the first conscious attempt at incorporating Romantic thought into the national literature (*Carilla* 1: 160-63). Romanticism had been adopted throughout the century as the ideological foundation of the “Americanismo literario” of Echeverría and the Venezuelan Andrés Bello (1781-1865), among others, who sought to authenticate expression through a return to an idyllic conception of the American landscape (*Carilla* 1: 194). Writers throughout the century had adopted the Romantic emphasis on the subject to ground their ideal of a truly “national” literature, an effort which coincided with the independence movements of the subcontinent. Modernismo, more than these previous efforts, fulfilled Martí’s Romantic search for an original Spanish American language, constituting a foundational literature for the emerging nations, most of which had achieved their independence, with the exception of Cuba and Puerto Rico, in the early nineteenth century. Martí must have looked back to Romanticism because of his anachronistic political goals, generating a strengthened “Americanistic” expression that would culminate in the

innovations of modernismo. This movement represents, according to Cathy L. Jrade, the “development of Romanticism, which had already started to create an original literature for the new, independent countries of Spanish America” (21-22). Since they could no longer look to Spain, which had arguably never had the necessary conditions for a Romanticism of its own, Spanish American poets had to recreate--or liberate--their inimitable and unique poetics under the aegis of the transforming power of the Romantic tradition, particularly German and French, in order to renovate discourse. This issue will be explored in the first chapter of this study, with respect to the central position of Martí, and to the importance of German Romanticism, and its integration of theory and practice in a transcendental Poesie or Universalpoesie, for his newly-found poetics and for the affirmation of the poema en prosa.

Before its appearance in France, the poema en prosa had had a relatively long history. Its genealogy is inseparable from literary explorations of long standing in Europe and America, such as poetic prose, the internal monologue, free verse, and especially the translations of verse into prose by eighteenth-century French and German authors. They translated classical Latin and Greek works, as well as Milton, into prose. Equally important is the subsequent revalorization, through the theoretical works of the German Romantics of the early part of the nineteenth century, of prose as a medium capable of fulfilling the unificatory ideals of the movement: to actualize poetry in every aspect of life, and in multiple forms. This is the ambition developed in the works of Friedrich Schlegel, who theorized the necessity for an omnipresent Romantic Universalpoesie that would take over all arts. For Schlegel, all aesthetic phenomena came together in this transcendental form: “In Rücksicht der Form nennt man in der Poesie überall dasjenige romantisch, was in einem

hohen Grade entweder musikalisch, oder pittoresk und farbig ist” (Der Poesiebegriff 107). This interchangeability of forms and expressive media was the motivation behind Baudelaire’s and Mallarmé’s attraction to the artistic current of wagnérisme, which incorporated music and poetry, with an “ambition d’être un art total, où l’idée habite à la fois le texte, musical et poétique, et l’espace scénique” (Désirat et al. 2423). Moreover, Schlegel’s Poesie would be actualized in prose rather than in verse: “Soll Poesie und Prosa gemischt, so muß das Ganze ‘offenbar’ prosaisch sein” (qtd. in Monroe 89). The transition from rhyme and meter to rhythm and image by the Romantics lead to a recognition of the internal attributes of prose, a form which until then had been considered the exclusive domain of reason and intellectual debate, and of a lesser category than poetry, regarded as the artistic form par excellence (Valender 13).¹⁰ This change in conception is clear in Novalis’s Hymnen an die Nacht, written at the end of the eighteenth century, in both verse and prose. Novalis puts identical content in both forms, deliberately face to face on the page, reflecting the inner struggle within discourse of narrative and lyric. The poema en prosa is the direct descendent of the Romantic ambition of transgressing discursive prescriptions and achieving a paradoxically trans-rhetorical form that brought together theory and praxis.

The Spanish American poema en prosa, actualizing the Romantic experiments with discourse, as well as the contemporary French innovations, represents a radical rejection of the syllabic versification that until then had been dutifully borrowed from Spain and that had precluded poets from achieving any enduring formal innovations. It embodied the Romantic ideal of a Universalpoesie integrating all genres, described by Schlegel as a future form capable of infinite correspondences with the world. In his

Athenäumsfragment 116, he wrote:

Die romantische Poesie ist eine progressive Universalpoesie. Ihre Bestimmung ist nicht bloß, alle getrennte Gattungen der Poesie wiederzuvereinigen, und die Poesie mit der Philosophie und Rhetorik in Berührung zu setzen. Sie will, und soll auch Poesie und Prosa, Genialität und Kritik, Kunstpoesie und Naturpoesie bald mischen, bald verschmelzen, die Poesie lebendig und gesellig, und das Leben und die Gesellschaft poetisch machen . . . Die romantische Dichtung ist noch im Werden; ja das ist ihr eigentliches Wesen, daß sie ewig nur werden, nie vollendet sein kann. Sie kann durch keine Theorie erschöpft werden. (Der Poesiebegriff 80-81)

For Schlegel, poetry is not actualized in a prescribed form, nor is it theorizable; it is rather in a continuous process of “becoming.” He questions the notion of the literary and of the rhetoricity of expression, and calls for reliance on the pervasiveness of an unobjectifiable element. He thus radically asserts, like the later French avant-garde (which spans the first three decades of this century) that poetry can be contained in “plain language” and reflect everyday life. It can be argued that it was through the poema en prosa, and the efforts of such writers as Martí, that Romanticism became fully actualized in Spanish American poetics. More than any conventional genre, the poema en prosa has the universalizing capacity envisioned in Romanticism, because it challenges the correlation between form and genre and therefore undermines the exclusivity of poetry within a single form, as it had been traditionally conceived. The poema en prosa attains the Romantic ideal of a literature that presupposes an inner realm independent from outward forms, and that therefore transcends its own

surface objectivity in order to constitute an original expression.

This renovating, even authenticating potential of the poema en prosa, is often a function of what Mikhail M. Bakhtin calls the heteroglossia of language, or the multiplicity of individual and collective identities within discourse. At the time when Casal undertook his first experiments with the poema en prosa, the language itself, not only its rhetorical genres, was unstable, particularly because of the extensive intersection of dialects or “tongues” which proliferated within the ethnic and cultural diversity of the continent. This proliferation, according to Julio Ramos, proceeded faster than the normativity of grammar and was a threat to the “totalizing project” of figures like Andrés Bello, whose foundational work on Spanish grammar was aimed at providing the newly independent colonies with ideological and economic unity: “For Bello, grammar was a foundational discourse of the modern state. Given the geographic, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the continent, Bello invested grammar with the task of establishing a rationalized master-code which he considered an irreducible condition for the implementation of modern law” (Ramos 27). This multiplicity of languages, and the subsequent transgression of the “official” discourse, was a manifestation of the widespread need, in the early twentieth century, of all the individual and silenced identities of Spanish America to assert themselves through “the monstrosity, for the man of the Enlightenment, of dispersion and fragmentation” (28). It was then, one can surmise, the task of the Romantic consciousness in modernismo to allow this fragmentation to be voiced in literary discourse, especially through the poema en prosa.

The new genre, moreover, epitomized the untotalized and unwilling meaningfulness that Bakhtin identified in his ground-breaking work on the

dialogism of the novel: “Stylistics and the philosophy of discourse indeed confront a dilemma: either to acknowledge the novel (and consequently all artistic prose tending in that direction) [as] an unartistic or quasi-artistic genre, or to radically reconsider that conception of poetic discourse in which traditional stylistics is grounded and which determines all its categories” (267). Bakhtin wanted the analysis of prose to take into account the inseparability of form and content when dealing with its so-called “style,” which for him could not be abstracted from the multiple languages of the novel. His theories set the foundation for a conception of discourse dependent on the subjective forces of language and social elements manifest in it. The poema en prosa, which well suits the poetics envisioned by Bakhtin, allows the voices of the social heteroglossia to precede that of the author. The poema en prosa presupposes a multiplicity of connotations and perspectives that precludes any unified language or reality, perhaps even more radically than the novel, since it does not need the pretext of narrative linearity: it can legitimize a continuous digression within its own mechanisms which enable it to generate a more disinterested heteroglossia. The different implications of the theoretical and ideological subversiveness of the genre will be the focus of the second chapter of this study, with special attention to the discourse’s dialogism in the poema en prosa of the postmodernistas.

Casal’s and Darío’s poemas en prosa are thus inscribed in an unformulated and mutable region of discourse, where they can claim for themselves originality and uniqueness, characterized by the employment of unlinear bursts of imagery and ambiguous aesthetic allusions that rely on the instantaneity of an intermediate form. Because of the history of the poema en prosa, from its initial subversiveness in German Romanticism to its

transformations and eventual affirmation in French Symbolism, its original appearance in Spanish America in the works of Casal and Darío has an intrinsically liberating character, due, in part, to criticism's inability to theorize about it.

Thus it is surprising that the poema en prosa has received hardly any attention as a profoundly transforming phenomenon in Spanish America, despite its pervasiveness in contemporary writing, and its recurrence during the modernista and vanguardia movements, when "no sólo muchos escritores de renombre de nuestras letras lo practicaron . . . sino que gran cantidad de poetas menores, y hoy poco conocidos, lo emplearon reiteradamente" (Dávila 30). This form has upset and transformed poetic discourse, by creating a deceiving effect of legitimacy--of narrativity--that endows it with freedom to modify and transgress its own limits. The poema en prosa embodies an implicit questioning of definite forms that enables Spanish American discourse to refashion its relation to Western tradition, and recover its innovative capacity.

The poema en prosa poses the fundamental problem of explaining how the rhetoric employed in prose can be poetic when present in a form deliberately thought of as something new, neither prose nor poetry, both but neither. This difficulty is due precisely to the novelty of the genre, created or acknowledged at a point in literary history when all boundaries between art forms were being dissolved. A century after Schlegel, Duchamp's Urinal must be recognized as art, and outward forms themselves have to be transcended by the reader or spectator in order to grasp the underlying expression of a work of art, which becomes more and more elusive. Beaujour attributes to the poema en prosa the role of protagonist in the contradictions of modern aesthetics: "The prose poem, with its mystic overtones and its suggestiveness of another,

esoteric, and unintelligible language, has been the weapon of Terror in its efforts to protect a higher agonistic and sacred art against the onslaughts of petty-bourgeois levelers” (57). The poema en prosa represents the will to assert poeticalness in a modern aesthetic milieu where “art” is no longer intimately linked to established paradigms of beauty or modes of signifying. The poema en prosa therefore constitutes the epitome of a search for a new poetics that no longer relies on formalist or objectivist prescriptions. It manages to evoke and suggest a multiplicity of meanings, associated with the fluidity of music. Its language realizes the rhythmic potential of expression, since its lack of form necessarily accentuates a type of musicality of signification which cannot be fixed in a particular pattern or score, but that relies on what Baudelaire calls, in his much-quoted phrase, the “soubresauts de la conscience,” allowing for the “miracle d’une prose poétique, musicale sans rythme et sans rime” (7).

This paradoxical form employs the Romantic transgression of formal prescriptions, and the dialogical multivoicedness of its hybrid discourse, enabling a renovated expression placed both within and outside of generic categories. The Chimerical ambition of the poema en prosa, which aims at the plenitude of an expression that is never fully defined, attracted Spanish American poets searching for aesthetic and ideological renovation. The contemporary practitioners of this form, discussed in the conclusion of this study, are especially aware of the original capacity of its discursive contradictions.

Chapter I
José Martí and the Romantic Origins
of the poema en prosa

The Cuban José Martí (1853-95) was the most prolific and influential ideologist of Spanish América during the formative decades of the late nineteenth century. During his exile years in New York, Martí's journalistic endeavors introduced the most relevant artistic, literary, social, and political themes of his time to an avid audience in Latin America, where he became "el informador universal de los pueblos latinoamericanos" (Marinello 16). A poet as well as a revolutionary and political thinker, his writings ranged from political and social reflections to artistic and literary commentaries, where he invariably expounded his theories on the formation of a unique and independent national identity for Spanish America. Through insightful commentaries on subjects as diverse as French Impressionism and Darwinism, and figures such as Thomas Jefferson, Martí sought to unify, as well as affirm, the cultural heritage of the new continent, which he regarded as a Pan-American unity rather than as individual countries: "De aquella América enconada y turbia, que brotó con las espinas en la frente y las palabras como lava, saliendo, junto con la sangre del pecho, por la mordaza mal rota, hemos venido, a puño de brazo, a nuestra América de hoy, heroica y trabajadora a la vez, y franca y vigilante, con Bolívar de un brazo y Herbert Spencer de otro" (3: 101). Martí believed a new kind of continental identity would result from the fusion of foreign and telluric forces. While extolling the presence and relevance of European and North-American

influences, this literary and political renovator proposed a philosophy of government and of literary expression grounded on the unique conditions of the Spanish-speaking nations, emerging from centuries of colonization. When writers, artists, and politicians still emulated imported ideals of government and artistic worth, Martí strove toward a different poetics for the countries that had yet to become ideologically and politically independent--a new world view and the necessary expression to represent it.

Fully aware of the importance of the European tradition, of which he is a conscious descendant, Martí called for an authentication of discourse according to the autochthonous characteristics of an unexplored Spanish American consciousness: "Por eso el libro importado ha sido vencido en América por el hombre natural. Los hombres naturales han vencido a los letrados artificiales. El mestizo autóctono ha vencido al criollo exótico. No hay batalla entre la civilización y la barbarie, sino entre la falsa erudición y la naturaleza," asserted Martí, undermining the predominant view, popularized by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's widely-read Facundo o civilización y barbarie (1845), that the Spanish American continent had to be "tamed" by the intellect (3: 107). Martí exalted precisely the potential of a "natural" human being who overcame the undisguised artificiality of foreign influences. He believed that the expression of the Old World had become archaic and could not apply to the unprecedented conditions of the New World, although there still had to be a solid foundation on Western tradition: "El estudio es un mérito; pero la imitación es un error," he warned (3: 628). This new expression must respond to the relevance, in his thought, of ideals and presuppositions that were predominantly informed by the Romantic spirit. Martí's vision of the greatness of "Nuestra América," as he often referred to it, was linked to the exuberance of

nature and the uniqueness and centrality of the individual, which are basic precepts of Romanticism: “. . . la vida personal dudadora, alarmada, preguntadora, inquieta, luzbérica; la vida íntima febril, no bien enquistada, pujante, clamorosa, ha venido a ser el asunto principal y, con la Naturaleza, el único asunto legítimo de la poesía moderna” (3: 448). For him, poetry had become subjective and needed to respond to the internal resonances of the individual. It had to employ a personal language that echoed nature, restoring the kind of connectedness and universality extolled by German Romantics such as Friedrich Schlegel, whose anti-classicist aesthetic had been superficially studied in the continent. Martí, on the other hand, founded his ideas directly on the German Romantics, who until that time had been known mainly through French translations of poets such as J. W. Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, and Heinrich Heine, as well as Schlegel and his brother, August Wilhelm (Carilla 1: 138-39), and works such as Mme. de Staël’s *De l’Allemagne* (1: 93).¹¹ Known as the “voz de América” (Bellini 251), Martí was one of the few Spanish American writers who had an all-encompassing and thorough knowledge of literatures not often highlighted in the Spanish tradition, through which he wanted to renew the continent’s expression. Aníbal González explains this purpose in his assessment of Martí’s famous Prologue to Juan Antonio Pérez Bonalde’s “El poema del Niágara”:

[Martí] deliberately studied the earlier Anglo-Germanic Romanticism because he knew that its ideas had only reached America through their dilute French and Spanish adaptations. Martí’s interest in Romanticism does not spring from the nostalgia of a latecomer, however, but from his eclectic search for elements with which to lay the foundations of a solid Spanish American

literature. (89-90)

Martí, the preeminent advocate of an original Spanish American expression, searched for political and artistic identity through foreign influences that he thought had never been fully acknowledged.

Although Romanticism had been a predominant literary force in Spanish America throughout the nineteenth century, it had been a diluted version borrowed from the Spanish Romantics. Martí therefore alluded to the need to deepen the continent's precarious awareness of the German and English tradition:

Vivimos, los que hablamos lengua castellana, llenos todos de Horacio y de Virgilio, y parece que las fronteras de nuestro espíritu son las de nuestro lenguaje. ¿Por qué nos han de ser fruta casi vedada las literaturas extranjeras, tan sobradas hoy de ese ambiente natural, fuerza sincera y espíritu actual que falta en la moderna literatura española? Ni la huella que en Núñez de Arce ha dejado Byron, ni la que los poetas alemanes imprimieron en Campoamor y Bécquer, ni una que otra traducción pálida de alguna obra alemana o inglesa bastan a darnos idea de la literatura de los eslavos, germanos y sajones, cuyos poemas tienen a la vez del cisne níveo, de los castillos derruidos, de las robustas mozas que se asoman a su balcón lleno de flores, y de la luz plácida y mística de las auroras boreales. Conocer diversas literaturas es el medio mejor de libertarse de la tiranía de alguna de ellas . . . (qtd. in Schulman and González 166)

It was imperative, according to Martí, to know these traditions directly in order to be freed from them, but also to recover what was relevant in them, as attested

by his reference in his novel, Amistad funesta, to Goethe's Wilhelm Meister (Carilla 1: 145).¹² As Octavio Paz repeatedly confirms, Romanticism was the direct antecedent of modernismo, and Martí, the preeminent modernista, the writer most conscious of this influence.¹³

German Romanticism, in turn, had been influenced by Spanish literature, and this movement's views constitutes the origin of the modern interpretation of canonical figures such as Cervantes and Calderón, who were admired not only by Schlegel (Krömer 124), but by German writers and critics in general: "Entre 1750 y 1800, prácticamente cada aspecto y cada faceta de la vida alemana . . . estaban relacionados directa o indirectamente con el Quijote. Virtualmente, todos los temas contradictorios que encontramos en el Romanticismo, son los que los románticos creyeron haber encontrado en Cervantes" (Eisenberg 16). Schlegel's admiration of Don Quijote, and the impact the novel had on the Romantic movement itself, suggest a more direct link to Spanish America than might be expected, and is an ironic precedent for Martí's evocation of Romantic ideals.¹⁴

German Romanticism was the first Europe-wide movement to experiment with the formal or theoretical boundaries between genres and to explore the possibility of redefining them. Schlegel undermined "the belief in unchangeable literary genres which would be valid for all time" (Behler and Struc 19). He tested the definitions of discursive categories in order to formulate his own metadiscursive notions about literature, thus asking: "(Giebts poetische Prosa oder annihilirt sie sich selbst?) Da es prosaische Poesie giebt (den Roman) so muß es auch wohl poetische Prosa geben" (Der Poesiebegriff 77). Within this framework of probing and experimentation, the existence of the poema en prosa, at least in its beginnings, constituted a break from the

boundaries of literature, which Schlegel explored in order to find the poetic elements that prevailed independently of genre, namely the creative “spirit” in such authors as Cervantes, Dante, and Shakespeare. Poetry was, in Romantic discourse, Poesie or Universalpoesie, not a preestablished form but rather a principle, a spiritual force that legitimized thought: “Die einzige gültige Beglaubigung eines Priesters ist die, daß er Poesie redet,” asserted Schlegel (Der Poesiebegriff 79). Schlegel, who “attempted to deduce a system of poetics a priori” (Eichner, Schlegel 34), conceived of Poesie as the new religion, an expression grounded on the transcendence of historically conditioned forms.

Poesie is therefore not a separable art form, but mainly the principle that underlies life, suffusing all expression and as all-encompassing as philosophy: “Alle Kunst soll Wissenschaft, und alle Wissenschaft soll Kunst werden; Poesie und Philosophie sollen vereinigt sein” (Der Poesiebegriff 75). Philosophy and poetry should be united because Schlegel’s ideal expression is grounded on individual subjectivity, which relativizes dialectic distinctions between theory and praxis. Furthermore, Schlegel emphasized that the highest Poesie is actualized in the Roman, which is itself a mutating form that encompassed any modern “work of fiction that did not belong to any of the three classical genres--the epic, the drama, and the lyric,” such as “the rhymed epic in a modern vernacular, the romance, the novel, and even certain types of drama” (Eichner, Schlegel 53-54). The Roman is an uncategorizable form which anticipates the poema en prosa, constituting “die progressive Form par excellence” (Eichner, Gespräch 10). This notion presupposes that discourse evolves and necessarily transcends the definitions imposed on it. Thus Schlegel represented the Roman--insofar as it was the embodiment of Poesie--as an ideal and

unachievable form that, as Hans Eichner explains, can never arrive at its totalizing and transcendent end, since it is continually transforming itself: “Da aber ein Werk, das wirklich alle Stoffe und Formen umfaßt, menschliche Kräfte übersteigt, so ist . . . der vollkommene Roman keine historische Gegebenheit, sondern eine unendliche Aufgabe, ein Ideal, dem man sich nur nähern, das man aber nie erreichen kann” (Gespräch 10). The Roman does not exist as a historical given but as an ideal that encompasses any form and content at once and is therefore unformulizable.

The unification of poetry and prose through the multifaceted Roman underscores the irreducibility of this new discourse to dialectic categories of theory and praxis; there is consequently no established theoretical framework from which to analyze discourse. Since philosophy and poetry are claimed inseparable, the questioning of literature becomes embedded in expression. Through the constant interaction between the critical and the creative modes, Schlegel aimed at determining “whether the learned insights of the literary critic can exert a positive stimulus upon living poetry; and if so, how knowledge, reflection, and criticism can transform literature” (Behler and Struc 14). This intersection of criticism and creativity constitutes the origin of the modern realization of the problematic distinction between poetry and prose and, moreover, between artistic and rhetorical prose that will be a focus of debate in the twentieth century, especially with regard to the poema en prosa. The Romantic theorization about poetry, characteristic of Schlegel’s writings, inevitably turned into poetry itself. This was exemplified in his own literary experiments with the dialogue form to portray his philosophical ideas in his Gespräch über die Poesie or Dialogue on Poetry (1800), published in the third and last volume of the Athenäum. The latter was the most influential

publication of German Romanticism, where the Schlegel brothers, the philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher, the writer Ludwig Tieck, and the poet Novalis, created a coordinated literary and theoretical manifestation of early Romantic thought. Schlegel's non-linear exposition of his ideas formed the basis of the "semireligious, semiphilosophical, and semiliterary pantheism" of this all-encompassing movement (Behler and Struc 6).¹⁵ His ideal discourse could only be analyzed through a discourse that was itself in transformation and was as powerful as the creative medium, given his dictum that "Poesie kann nur durch Poesie kritisiert werden" (Der Poesiebegriff 75). Poesie is inseparable from the discourse that refers to it, and it can consequently never achieve closure as a definite form, nor be objectified through another discourse. The critical moment then becomes poetic for Romanticism; dialectic is merged with imagination--subjectivity and objectivity are integrated so that poetry is indistinguishable from poetics, and thought from images.

The integration of the literary and the theoretical in Romantic thought is the direct antecedent of the poema en prosa, a form which presupposes its own theory, and is capable of possessing both lyricism and thought. The poema en prosa encompasses multiple structures and discourses; and exacerbates the fundamental struggle of Romanticism against categorization and genre. It affirms an internal coherence that profits from the ideal Romantic transgression of boundaries. Paz thus traces the emergence of the new discourse to the Romantic ideal of a universal language that subverts the logical distinction between poeticalness and thought, thereby questioning the rationalist project of the Enlightenment:

La conjunción entre la teoría y la práctica, la poesía y la poética, fue una manifestación más de la aspiración romántica hacia la

fusión de los extremos: el arte y la vida . . . la imaginación y la ironía. Mediante el diálogo entre prosa y poesía se perseguía, por una parte, vitalizar a la primera por su inmersión en el lenguaje común y, por la otra, idealizar la prosa, disolver la lógica del discurso en la lógica de la imagen. Consecuencia de esta interpenetración: el poema en prosa. (Los hijos 92-93)

The poema en prosa, a discourse that by definition questions its own boundaries, is lyric in a Romantic sense--it aims at transgressing the contingencies of discourse and attaining intrinsic poeticalness, which is redeemed by individual subjectivity. Schlegel's conception of this ideal Poesie comes out of the individual in organic communion with the world:

Wie der Kern der Erde sich von selbst mit Gebilden und
Gewächsen bekleidete, wie das Leben von selbst aus der Tiefe
hervorsprang, und alles voll ward von Wesen die sich fröhlich
vermehrten; so blüht auch Poesie von selbst aus der unsichtbaren
Urkraft der Menschheit hervor, wenn der erwärmende Strahl der
göttlichen Sonne sie trifft und befruchtet. (Der Poesiebegriff 91)

Poesie, to Schlegel, is a kind of primordial protolanguage that comes out of the "deep recesses" of the individual and revindicates itself through its relationship to the world.

Inspired by this holistic backdrop of Romanticism, Martí proposed a poetics that responds to what he considered the American embryonic condition of undisturbed Nature, which must give rise to discourse from within its own raw potential, instead of from inherited and "artificial" paradigms. This poetics is grounded on individual expression:

En el poeta debe haber una gran potencia observadora. Se

llama ahora poeta subjetivo, y hay sobrada razón para llamarle así, al que pinta su propio ser, toma en sí mismo el motivo--subjeto [sic]--de sus inspiraciones, y no procura que del exterior--objeto--vengan las inspiraciones a su alma: no es el cristal de un lago, es un tronco robusto que de sí brota rama y follaje.

(Martí 3: 628)

This poetics is reliable because it is not attained through external models, but through the undialectic inner impulse of subjectivity. Even the organic metaphor employed by Martí to express this concept has Romantic undertones. It alludes to the lake-like stagnation of old mimetic models, which Spanish American poets must transcend in order to create out of their unique conditions. Their new poetry does not reflect the world like a mirror but is rather an organic unity intimately linked to the “soil” out of which it springs. The “leaves” or fruits of this poetics are a natural extension of its intrinsic characteristics or its “trunk.”

For Martí, the emergent Spanish American expression was grounded on an all-encompassing organicism. Nature was the ultimate metaphor that, together with that of nation, constituted the legitimizing principle of his poetics:

No nos dió la Naturaleza en vano las palmas para nuestros bosques, y Amazonas y Orinocos para regar nuestras comarcas; de estos ríos la abundancia, y de aquellos palmares la eminencia, tiene la mente hispanoamericana, por lo que conserva del indio, cuerda; por lo que le viene de la tierra, fastuosa y volcánica; por lo que de árabe le trajo el español, perezosa y artística. ¡Oh!, el día en que empiece a brillar, brillará cerca del Sol. (3: 114)

The Spanish American mind was for Martí inseparable from the singular historical and natural landscape of America, which represented the promise of

renovation. He therefore evoked a discourse devoid of preconceived formulas that responded to the conditions of the new continent, as expressed in his essay on the American Romantic Walt Whitman, a poet whom he introduced to the Spanish-speaking world and whose books he called “natural,” in contrast to the systematized and contrived poetry endorsed by academic convention: “Los criados a leche latina, académica o francesa, no podrían, acaso, entender aquella gracia heroica. La vida libre y decorosa del hombre en un continente nuevo ha creado una filosofía sana y robusta que está saliendo al mundo en épodos atléticos” (2: 88). The new philosophy, product of a renewed awareness of the American world, had its source outside rhetoric; it was a “healthy” discourse patterned on nature. In this way, Martí turned his literary essay (which was published in La Nación, an Argentinean newspaper of large circulation) into a social commentary that had political repercussions: “Creíais la religión perdida, porque estaba mudando de forma sobre vuestras cabezas. Levantáos, porque vosotros sois los sacerdotes. La libertad es la religión definitiva. Y la poesía de la libertad el culto nuevo” (2: 90). Poetry was for Martí a means of cultural affirmation, which should function as the modern religion, as Schlegel had claimed before him. A “free” poetic discourse, such as the one he sensed in Whitman, was thus propitious of political and intellectual liberty, since an autonomous expression was indispensable to an autonomous political identity. Through this essay on a new kind of poetry, Martí sought to awaken the continent to its roots and to its potential.

Martí saw in Whitman the archetype of the universal poet, one that does not follow a particular school--the human poet who denies no aspect of himself and whose expression ignores preconceived models: “Él se crea su gramática y su lógica,” said Martí, applauding the radical innovation of Whitman’s poetry,

which had a new kind of coherence (2: 87). Martí conceived the poet in a universe of correspondences which give meaning to existence: “En su persona se contiene todo; todo él está en todo; donde uno se degrada, él se degrada; él es la marea, el flujo y el reflujo; ¿cómo no ha de tener orgullo en sí, si se siente parte viva e inteligente de la Naturaleza?” (2: 91). Modernismo takes directly from the Romantic organicist perception of the universe, as Martí interprets it in Whitman. In modernista verse, Paz notes that “el ritmo poético no es sino la manifestación del ritmo universal: todo se corresponde porque todo es ritmo. La vista y el oído se enlazan; el ojo ve lo que el oído oye: el acuerdo, el concierto de los mundos. Fusión entre lo sensible y lo inteligible: el poeta oye y ve lo que piensa. Y más: piensa en sonidos y visiones” (Los hijos 135). Paz alludes to the musical and pictorial undertones of modernismo, emphasizing an aesthetic continuum that integrates all art forms. This Symbolist notion, which aimed at the aesthetic unity of all experience, is an attempt at a more fulfilling correspondence with the world.

Martí wanted literature to return to this original state, emblematic of the purity of the American landscape, where the poet is attuned to the nature that surrounds him. This fundamentally Romantic idea of a unified consciousness was the core of the new Spanish American poetics: “Que el hombre viva en analogía con el universo, y con su época; para lo cual no le sirven el Latín y el Griego,” asserted Martí (3: 497). The belief in an analogous expression that correlates to the world is an optimistic reformulation of the Platonic ideal, which presupposes a perfect realm of pure Ideas beyond the world of concrete objects. This view also gives precedence to prose, since it is a genre that transcends the contingent and arbitrary forms of poetry. Martí’s poetic emphasis was therefore on the inner configuration of discourse: “Puesto que el

ritmo de la frase se hizo más importante que la versificación silábica, la prosa fue reconocida como medio de expresión igualmente aceptable para el poeta” (Valender 13). Given his belief in the underlying correspondences and harmony of expression, prose, a traditionally unaesthetic medium, became as worthy as poetry.

The prose in which Martí put forth his ideals of an authentic continental expression was itself renovating and original. It is often considered the best-crafted Spanish prose in the modern period. Martí is judged to be “el primer ‘creador’ de prosa que ha tenido el castellano,” according to Guillermo Díaz-Plaja in his influential book, El poema en prosa en España, where he traces the Spanish origins of the poema en prosa in America (37). This assertion is founded on the poeticalness and profundity of innumerable essays, articles, and chronicles written by Martí throughout his life, perfecting an art that integrated his theoretical ideals with his expression, and exposing the ambiguous boundary between poetry and prose. Like the elusive Schlegelian Roman, his prose had a tendency to be indistinguishable in expression from his creative work. There was a dialogue between both modes in all his writing: “Más de una vez se ha señalado que la prosa de Martí aparece atravesada, mechada, de versos tan bellos como los mejores de sus poemas . . . En sentido inverso, la obra poética de Martí es como un coto cerrado en que se concentran las virtudes manifiestas en su prosa” (Marinello 36). Through the unified nature of his work, Martí attained the role of a theoretician/creator who is, furthermore, a revolutionary. This work arguably fulfilled what Schlegel had envisioned as a Poesie that distanced itself from a particular form and became unified with thought and action, and which was actualized in the quotidian realm: “Das gesamte Leben und die gesamte Poesie sollen in Contract gesetz

werden; die ganze Poesie soll popularisirt werden und das ganze Leben poetisirt” and thus “Poesie muß und kann ganz mit dem Leben verschmelzen” (Der Poesiebegriff 79). The Romantic poet, like the revolutionary, lives out an aesthetic or political ideal; his theory is inseparable from praxis.

The “tensión poética” of Martí’s prose is furthermore considered, by critics such as Díaz-Plaja, to be the direct antecedent of the poema en prosa, both theoretically and aesthetically (37). Martí was the first to formulate the need to transcend rhetoric--and the categories dependent on it--as prerequisite for a legitimate Spanish American discourse. The “formulación anti-discursiva” of his own work (Fernández 41), and its Romantic evocation of “natural” and individual expression, opened the way for the new poetic forms to come. Martí deliberately departed from a mimetic paradigm of literature in his tendencies toward free verse: “Es ley ya que termine la fatigosa poesía convencional, rimada con palabras siempre iguales que obligan a una semejanza enojosa en las ideas” (628). He seemed to predict the instantaneity and brevity of the poema en prosa:

Alarmado a cada instante el concepto literario por un evangelio nuevo; desprestigiadas y desnudas todas las imágenes que antes se reverenciaban; desconocidas aun las imágenes futuras, no parece posible, en este desconcierto de la mente, en esta revuelta vida sin vía fija, carácter definido, ni término seguro . . . producir aquellas luengas y pacientes obras, aquellas dilatadas historias en verso, aquellas celosas imitaciones de gentes latinas que se escribían pausadamente, año sobre año . . . en la beatífica calma que ponía en el espíritu la certidumbre de que el buen indio amasaba el pan, y el buen rey daba la ley, y la madre Iglesia

abrigo y sepultura. (3: 445)

This call for aesthetic liberation had political connotations in the new nations where colonial rule had been overthrown, and where the struggle for independence was still relevant, as in Cuba and Puerto Rico. The new literature had to correspond to modern consciousness, for which long, rhetorical expositions were no longer useful. To liberate poetry of old models was also to change society. As former social and psychological certainties were no longer given, literature responded by becoming short and concise, two characteristics precisely associated to the poema en prosa.

Parallel to his political and aesthetic efforts to raise the level of self-awareness of Spanish America, Martí put his ideas to practice in his own poetic work, which contained some of the most passionate and personal expressions the continent had ever known. His poetic style had the spontaneity and authenticity he encouraged in other writers. One of the aspects that Martí admired most in Whitman's poetry was its unconventional poetic style, with its "caos aparente de frases superpuestas y convulsas" that are constructed in "enormes bloqueadas" (2: 94). Martí realized that the discourse of the new continent had to break free from formal impositions that obscured the expressive capacities of language. The introductory poem from his posthumous collection entitled Flores del destierro began significantly with this succinct statement: "Contra el verso retórico y ornado / El verso natural," although it was framed in traditional hendecasyllabic verses (4: 524). Martí proposed a "natural" verse form that was against rhetorical convention. He therefore explored the means of his own expression, obsessed with achieving honesty and simplicity of forms: "Amo la sencillez y creo en la necesidad de poner el sentimiento en formas llanas y sinceras," he said in his prologue to

Versos sencillos, published in 1891 (4: 463). These “simple” and “sincere” forms are a testimony to what he wished for an authentic discourse--a poetics that would rely on itself to achieve originality, rather than on prefabricated models. Similarly, Martí’s prologue to Versos libres (1882) was an apology for his bare style, stripped of all adornment, in verses that were, despite their impeccable versification, inexorably his own, truly “libres” from all influences:

Estos son mis versos. Son como son. A nadie los pedí prestados. Mientras no pude encerrar íntegras mis visiones en una forma adecuada a ellas, dejé volar mis visiones . . .

Tajos son éstos de mis propias entrañas--mis guerreros.-- Ninguno me ha salido recalentado, artificioso, recompuesto, de la mente; sino como las lágrimas salen de los ojos y la sangre sale a borbotones de la herida.

No zurcí de éste y aquél, sino saqué en mí mismo. Van escritos, no en tinta de academia, sino en mi propia sangre. Lo que aquí doy a ver lo he visto antes (yo lo he visto, yo), y he visto mucho más, que huyó sin darme tiempo a que copiara sus rasgos.--De la extrañeza, singularidad, prisa, amontonamiento, arrebató de mis visiones, yo mismo tuve la culpa, que las he hecho surgir ante mí como las copio. De la copia yo soy el responsable. Hallé quebrados los vestidos, y otros no y usé de estos colores. Ya sé que no son usados. Amo las sonoridades difíciles y la sinceridad, aunque pueda parecer brutal. (4: 476)

Martí formulates here the principles of his expression, which originate in an effort to transcend an evident rhetoricity and to create an individualistic poetry of the self, much like the one he discovered in Whitman: “No zurcí de éste y

aquél, sino saqué en mí mismo.” The spontaneity of his discourse, which flows like blood, unlike the preestablished and constraining “academic ink,” precludes him from “copying” what he sees. His poetics presupposes the inability of language to keep up with his emotions and perceptions, and therefore its unfinished or “brutal” nature. His verses are written in blood, pointing to their frankness and subjectivity. This image of discourse as the product of a “wound,” which transcends the “forma adecuada,” is an appropriate rendition of the unconventional and unformalized poeticalness of the poema en prosa. Its flexibility is symbolized by this organic allusion to the body, which is more reliable than rhetoric, since it is legitimized by a tangible physicality; but it is, at the same time, an illegitimate, and therefore subversive, opening of the body. Paz also employs the notion of the “open wound” of discourse to represent the phenomenon of the poema en prosa: “Por la herida de la significación el ser pleno que es el poema se desangra y se vuelve prosa” (Cuadrivio 38). For Paz, the inevitable transition of discourse from poetry into prose is metaphorically symbolized as a bodily transgression that is painful but renovating. The “wound” of discourse represents the possibility of rhetoric questioning itself through the violent opening, by the poema en prosa, of the “inner” structure of discourse.

Modernismo, which made possible the conditions for the poema en prosa, is generally considered to begin with Martí’s poetic collection entitled Ismaelillo, published in 1882. There are significant differences between his aesthetic ideals and those of the movement, which is largely associated with Rubén Darío. Perhaps Martí is given the title of initiator, not because he shared stylistic influences with Darío (who, after all, was attributed a “galicismo mental” for his exclusive and undisguised emulation of French forms and ideals [Valera

25]), but because he introduced the theoretical basis for an integration of foreign influences that so distinctly made modernismo conform to the ideals intrinsic to “Nuestra América.” Martí enabled this syncretic movement, and all of the literary currents that followed it, to attempt an aesthetically and politically autonomous voice. Federico de Onís recognizes that “su modernidad apuntaba más lejos que la de los modernistas y hoy es más válida y patente que entonces” (35). The originality of Martí’s expression opens the way for the prose of Darío, the leading figure of what is referred to as the second-generation modernistas, including poets such as Leopoldo Lugones, Ricardo Jaimes Freyre, Amado Nervo, Enrique González Martínez, Enrique Gómez Carrillo, José Enrique Rodó, Julio Herrera y Reissig, and Manuel Díaz Rodríguez (see Anderson Imbert 16). The oft-quoted phrase, “Sin Martí no hay Rubén” (e.g., Díaz-Plaja 38), reflects the importance of Martí’s liberating discourse for the poet invariably associated with modernismo.

Darío’s work represents a syncretism of foreign trends and ideas, endowing the Spanish American discourse with the sophistication and aestheticism of the Old Continent, while asserting a distinctly Spanish American register. He responds enthusiastically to French Parnassians and Symbolists, especially to their allusive mystical and mythological imagery: “Nada de anécdotas o de elocuencia. Lo que valía era la sugerencia, mediante símbolos y sonidos, de honduras raras, sutiles, desconocidas, reticentes, inefables,” explains Enrique Anderson Imbert to describe the ideals of Darío and his followers, who relied on “el impresionismo pictórico, la sinfonía wagneriana, el individualismo nórdico, las filosofías idealistas, y las teogonías orientales” (14). Darío sought to create a suggestive expression that combined leading aesthetic concepts of the fin de siècle. Modernismo similarly revered

music, attempting a kind of unspecified and subtly evocative meaningfulness, akin to the expressiveness of melody. Martí had attempted such a discourse, an allusive, and not formally concrete poetic expression, although with much broader models in mind. It is primarily from Martí that Darío took his interest in the stylistic innovations of prose: “Todas,” assert Iván A. Schulman and Manuel Pedro González, “absolutamente todas las que sin previo análisis se han tenido por ‘innovaciones’ y preciosidades en la prosa rubeniana de Azul... y la posterior a 1888, así como en la de sus émulos finiseculares, se dieron ya en Martí desde 1881” (164). Martí’s prose was a decisive model for Darío.

Darío also looked back to Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, the preeminent (and perhaps the lone) Spanish Romanticist poet who, according to Luis Cernuda, “adivina en España la necesidad de la poesía en prosa y . . . responde a ella y le da forma en sus Leyendas” (qtd. in Fernández 23). Prose is where Darío is usually attributed greater creativity, despite the popularity of his verse poems; and as Anderson Imbert points out, “las primeras innovaciones en Hispanoamérica ocurrieron en prosa” (39). Darío’s ambiguous prose, consisting of essays, short stories, and poemas en prosa, is characterized by a drastic departure from the rational and eloquent prose prevalent in Spanish American letters. When reading Darío, asserts Anderson Imbert, “ya no se sabía si se estaba leyendo un cuento o un poema en prosa o una crónica de viaje o una página arrancada, sea de un diario íntimo o de un cuaderno de memorias” (41). His hybrid work is characterized by “fertilizaciones cruzadas entre el ensayo, el cuento y el poema” (245). These unclassifiable “fertilizations” among discursive forms responds to the modernista use of prose as a space for innovation. Darío exploits the lyrical prose developed by Martí to create an artificial world “out of this world,” according to Anderson Imbert,

employing stylistic resources more akin to poetry in order to create a new kind of discourse: “estribillos; onomatopeyas y aliteraciones; simetrías, paralelos, entrecruzamientos y contrastes. Todo ondulante, como una música de palabras, nueva al oído español” (42). Darío recognized the mutable potential of this medium when he declared that the short story is a “género delicado y peligroso que en los últimos tiempos ha tomado todos los rumbos y todos los vuelos” (qtd. in Anderson Imbert 216). The danger of prose, as Darío implied, was its unusual flexibility, making it his favorite medium. The ground for his aesthetic experiments lies in the intermediacy and multiplicity of prose forms, which express something that is still in formation, a certain mixture of verse and narrative that creates unclassifiable prose entities such as “La canción del oro,” “El rubí,” and “El palacio del sol,” all from his ground-breaking collection, Azul... (1888), which consists predominantly of prose pieces. These are unique oneiric explorations of altered states of consciousness, which probe aesthetically the boundaries of discourse through a surreal portrayal of everyday situations.

One of Darío’s poemas en prosa from Azul..., which is part of a sequence of interconnected but independent prose fragments, is “La cabeza,” an instance of the poet’s innovative prose hybrids:

Por la noche, sonando aún en sus oídos la música del Odeón
y los parlamentos del Astol, de vuelta de las calles donde
escuchara el ruido de los coches y la triste melopeya de los
tortilleros, aquel soñador se encontraba en su mesa de trabajo,
donde las cuartillas inmaculadas estaban esperando las silvas y
los sonetos de costumbre a las mujeres de los ojos ardientes.

¡Qué silvas! ¡Qué sonetos! La cabeza del poeta lírico era una

orgía de colores y de sonidos. Resonaban en las concavidades de aquel cerebro martilleos de cíclope, himnos al son de tímpanos sonoros, fanfarrias bárbaras, risas cristalinas, gorjeos de pájaros, batir de alas y estallar de besos, todo como en ritmos locos y revueltos. Y los colores agrupados estaban como pétalos de capullos distintos confundidos en una bandeja o como la endiablada mezcla de tintas que llena la paleta de un pintor... (97)

Darío's poema en prosa represents not a finished literary creation but a preamble to the creative act, alluded to by the "immaculate" page ready for "las silvas y los sonetos de costumbre." It evokes sensations and experiences that are waiting to enter the poet's writing, but the object of the poema en prosa ultimately never materializes; there is nothing to represent the "martilleos de cíclopes, himnos al son de tímpanos sonoros, fanfarrias bárbaras." The "colors" and "sounds" remain in the poet's "head," an organic space of fluid correspondences which alludes to the poema en prosa. This is a text about a structure's creative capacity, which remains unexpended; its plenitude cannot be transferred into paper, beyond the "concavidades de aquel cerebro." This seems to be an explicit allusion to the internal poeticalness of the poema en prosa, which is not formal and originates in the subjectivity of the poet's sensations. The poet thus provides a description of the material for the poem in the process of writing it. The prose in which it is described, however, is not linear; its images are dispersed and unexplained, unlike a narrative with a resolution: "la música del Odeón y los parlamentos del Astol" are hermetic allusions that have no obvious explanation, and that evoke the Symbolist syncretic intersection of all aesthetic media. It is not clear whether the poem will actually be created; what matters seems to be the anticipation, or rather the

“uncreated” state of expression; its prediscursive chaos of “ritmos locos y revueltos” that cannot fit into “the accustomed sonnets and silvas.” The creative act is therefore metadiscursive; what matters is how it takes place, as symbolized by its explicit reference to the “head.” The theory of the poema en prosa is thus inseparable from its practice: the text generates its form in the process of its creation, by describing its ideal configuration, its “orgía de colores y de sonidos,” with the very discourse it cannot elude: it is an incomplete and self-conscious expression that recognizes its own limits. Darío’s poema en prosa constitutes a criticism of the mimetic aim for universal correspondences, as writing attempts to resemble the unmimetic character of painting and music. The poet’s awareness of color resembles a painter’s “endiablada mezcla de tintas” rather than his own discourse, which is actualized in the idea of a “sonnet” rather than in the sonnet itself.

In a later poema en prosa by Darío, “Día de primavera” (undated), the allusion to the process of creation takes place in a distinctly void structure, unlike the deceiving fullness of the “head” of the poet:

Cerca del blando tronco de la haya, estaríais vos, señorita,
con vuestro sombrero blanco, vuestro vestido blanco y vuestra
alma blanca. Yo tendría mi negro dolor. Procuraría haceros
soñar dulces sueños, y el laúd no tendría para vos sino los más
acariciadores sonidos. “Sí--dice ella--; mas esa ‘villa’ italiana...,
¿no será la morada de la más infeliz de las mujeres?” Los
árboles sombríos forman un misterioso recinto de duelo. El agua
de los arroyos parece monologar extrañas historias de amores
difuntos. El crepúsculo inunda, con su tenue tinta de melancolía,
todo el paisaje. El anciano que contempla meditabundo las

ninfas, parece la encarnación de un triste pasado. Los niños que juegan cerca de la “villa” no alcanzan a hacer que mi alma encuentre una sola nota de alegría.

Nuestra alma, a veces, contagia con sus males el alma de las cosas. (Rubén Darío 565)

This poema en prosa also questions its creative medium. It begins with a reference to a beech tree, an organicist image tied to Martí's ideal of a new, more natural expression, grounded on the Romantic emphasis on correspondences between nature and the individual. The trunk, moreover, is soft, and can therefore be carved; it alludes to creativity and to writing, through the symbolic page of the white hat, dress, and soul of the “señorita” close to the beech tree. The poet attempts to create for her “los más acariciadores sonidos” by means of his lute, a metaphor of writing. Through a radically undialectic narrative inference, however, the “señorita” enters the text and questions his discourse, the “villa” where she would be trapped--his imagination/poem--as well as the possibility of having “sweet dreams,” thus voicing the gloomy and pessimistic reality/prose where the poet's ideal is radically undermined. The transcendent character of the “villa,” deliberately placed within quotation marks, is emphasized by the allusion to its emptiness and deceitful structure, of which the “señorita” is suspicious. The poet thus mourns a loss, not of “amores difuntos,” but of a reliable discourse. The images of nature that enter a monologue about language--the trees emblematic of expression and the landscape--are similarly tainted by “melancholy.” Instead of replying to the “señorita,” the poetic voice allows other subjects to speak in a fragmentary but coherent voice. Characters and voices merge in labyrinthian progression, avoiding any distinct perspective that might dissolve the mystery and

compromise the richness of the symbolism. Even the old man is the “encarnación de un triste pasado,” watching nymphs that are emblematic of an irretrievable mythical dimension.

The tone of Darío’s “Día de primavera” shifts from a high to a low key; it traverses a rich range of emotions in a succinct sequence and near fragments. The text does not need to specify the origin or direction of its voices, and allows for indefinite relations among them: the dialogue of the “señorita” responds to no cue or narrative prescription. There is thus no clear narrative thread, which alternates between multiple subjects: “vos,” “yo,” “ella,” “el anciano,” “los niños,” and “nuestra alma.” In the absence of a singular poetic voice, the text does not announce its resolution explicitly. The introductory conditional tense seems to suggest that this is a hypothetical reflection about something imagined, which alludes to fiction and the boundaries of reality: the “señorita” would be next to the beech tree, but she is ultimately not there, because she questions that fictional space and its rhetoric, which the speaker initially employs--the “acariciadores sonidos” that cannot be restored to their former effectiveness. Darío’s poema en prosa represents the trap of fiction, where the “señorita,” as the idealized object, could become silenced. The security of a complete and fulfilling discourse is questioned by the very object of the poet’s desire, the “señorita” who undermines the “villa,” or discourse, of his imagination.

As in Casal’s “Japonería,” Darío’s texts offer the ambiguous image of an empty structure, a “head” or “villa” which, like the “vase,” represents a deceptive realm which is paradoxically ideal. In Darío’s latter poema en prosa, the woman speaks and questions the validity of this fictional space where she would be trapped. Just as the “villa” is not what it appears to be, his poemas en prosa do not fall within the categories that conform it: prose and poetry. The

fragmentary and apparently arbitrary non-linear element of Darío's texts is alluded to by the images of structures that ultimately either have an unrepresentable content (the "head"), or are deceptive (the "villa"). In Darío's poemas en prosa, the poet is confronted simultaneously with the creative impulse and with the recognition of the limited mechanisms that make it possible--the "villa" at the center of his poetic ambition is ultimately an empty allusion. The narrative circles around a fundamental structure that is never uncovered; its purpose remains obscure. The poema en prosa thus constitutes a self-denying gesture; it promises, like Casal's text, a fulfilling structure that is ultimately absent.

The image of a closed space that formerly offered safety and that has turned into a deceptive convention will be further useful in analyzing the poemas en prosa of the postmodernistas, who embraced the renovating expression of Martí and Darío. The non-linear structure of the genre, and its voicing of multiple subjectivities, will be considered within the framework of Mikhail M. Bakhtin's dialogic theory of discourse.

Chapter II

The Paradox of Genre in the poema en prosa of the postmodernistas

The poema en prosa, as evinced by its Romantic origins, is a genre that deals intrinsically with problematic aspects of literary categories and formal traits. Since it explicitly merges two genres in following the Romantic Universalpoesie, it forces the reader to consciously view the discourse in terms of these dichotomies. Rather than simply subverting them, as an antimimetic postmodern text would, the poema en prosa moves these oppositions to the foreground, constituting itself as a site of conflict. Its form represents both an assertion and denial of the criteria that set literature apart from other discourses, but it is also, in the idealist tradition of the Romantics, an internalization of those criteria, endowing the genre with an especially unstable character. The poets that came after modernismo, who rejected the movement's purported "overload of sensory paraphernalia" (Kirkpatrick 3), placed particular emphasis on the poema en prosa. The Chileans Pedro Prado, Gabriela Mistral, and Pablo Neruda, the Uruguayan Juana de Ibarbourou, and the Venezuelan José Antonio Ramos Sucre, who repeatedly employed the poema en prosa, are considered transitional figures who prepared the way for the vanguardistas or, in the case of Neruda, who never conformed to any of these exclusive demarcations.

Perhaps the most appropriate definition of the poema en prosa can be attained within the dialogic framework in which Mikhail M. Bakhtin placed the

novel. The fundamental aspect of Bakhtin's influential book, The Dialogic Imagination, is the realization of the potential subversiveness of novelistic discourse, which questions how stylistics distinguishes literary from literal language. Bakhtin's conception of the novel, as a dialogic hybrid that integrates all forms and discourses, provides it with an aesthetic and social capacity. Rather than a stable and fixed form, the novel is an instrument that liberates discourse from the homogenizing impulse of social and intellectual institutions. Like this paradigmatic anti-genre (the novel), but even more explicitly, the poema en prosa places established literary canons in antagonism and creates a paradoxical region of contrast and identity. Although all discourses and subjects are, as Jonathan Monroe claims (71), "necessarily dialogical, conflictual, and inescapably social," the poema en prosa is a discourse in which aesthetic dichotomies are fundamentally played out against each other in the very constitution of the genre. Therefore the struggle to assert Spanish American identity within the history of artificial borrowings from other discourses and traditions is actualized in the poema en prosa's simultaneous dependence and subversion of conventional binary oppositions. The struggle to unify the literary and the non-literary, and poetry and prose, is also the struggle to achieve discursive identity beyond boundaries imposed by tradition, while remaining paradoxically bound to their dialogic interdependence. As Monroe points out, the poema en prosa demonstrates

the ultimate futility of all attempts to distinguish once and for all between poetry and prose, or between the literary and the non-literary, other than as the mutually defining ideological manifestations of particular historical periods and the provisional sites of struggle for a synthetic project that would ultimately seek to

abolish whatever putative differences have been maintained between them. (69)

The intrinsically oppositional form of the poema en prosa is thus an expression of the contingency of social and aesthetic conventions.

As Bakhtin showed, there is an unformalized linguistic dynamism in society that constitutes the basis of all social structures and identities. To control those languages is to destroy the inherent multiplicity and unpredictability of social and discursive relations. Language in the novel is inseparable from dialogue and context; because of its continuous transformation, the voices of the novel constitute an “internally persuasive discourse” that is nevertheless “authoritative” (Bakhtin 342). This tension between modes of discourse is the product of the interaction of social dialects, individual speeches, and genres that are represented in the novel. There can be no univocal language in novelistic relations; speech and dialogue necessarily undermine themselves, as all language is “double-voiced” (326), grounded on historical conditions that make it ambiguous and transformative:

This internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as a genre. The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions.

(Bakhtin 263)

For Bakhtin, poetry, on the other hand, concentrates the languages of society into a personal discourse that is “directly intentional,” “unitary and singular,” and ignores “actual available social dialects,” as well as “specific objects,

typical, socially localized and limited” (287). The poet, rather than allowing for the dialogism of the word, appropriates it completely. Bakhtin’s conception of the novel anticipates instead a discourse that transcends the boundary between the poetic and the prosaic: “Novelistic discourse is poetic discourse, but one that does not fit within the frame provided by the concept of poetic discourse as it now exists” (269). Bakhtin thus asserts the paradox that is articulated in the poema en prosa. This deliberately new form presupposes that the poetic is not merely a rhetorical category. Novelistic prose, and consequently, the prose of the poema en prosa, cannot be described within the traditional stylistic paradigm of generic distinctions. The poema en prosa, as a form that subverts all genres through the insertion of poetry into prose, allows for the multivoicedness and opposition of discourses that Bakhtin attributed to the novel. Like the voices he identified in the anonymous heteroglossia of the novel, the voices of the poema en prosa are “alive” with the divisive centrifugal forces of language, which condition each utterance to be “a typical double-accented, double-styled hybrid construction” (304). In the poema en prosa, there occurs “the annihilation of figure resulting from its endless proliferation” (Soucy, “Baudelaire’s” 46), making language malleable and ambiguous, resisting its own boundaries of signification. The poema en prosa is characterized by a self-referential exploration of these boundaries.

Pedro Prado (1886-1952), a significant figure in Chilean letters, who had a decisive influence on Gabriela Mistral and Pablo Neruda (Kelly 135-36), is the first writer from that country to employ the poema en prosa, and the first Spanish American writer to devote an entire book to the new genre, in his innovative La casa abandonada (1912). Referred to as a “literary amphibian” by Mistral, Prado created an influential opus which includes three additional

volumes of poemas en prosa entitled Los pájaros errantes (1915), Los diez (1915), and Las copas (1921), and where “traditional genres rarely appeared in a pure state” (Kelly i). Prado’s unique prose was consecrated with the publication Los pájaros errantes, which constitutes “the epitome of Prado’s development and success in the hybrid genre of the prose poem” and is considered the predecessor for the later innovations of poets such as Vicente Huidobro and Pablo de Rokha (Kelly 45-46). His poema en prosa, “Oración al despertar,” from Los pájaros errantes, attests to the discursive duality of his work:

Tengo vacío el hondo espacio que el sueño dejara en mí.
Todavía oigo su vago y monstruoso murmullo. Conservan mis ojos un turbio recuerdo de la profunda sombra silenciosa. Mi cuerpo créese aún entre las alas oscuras de ese inmenso mar callado.

En esta hora del despertar, inocente de sabiduría, libre de esperanzas, mis ojos vagabundos se detienen un instante sobre cada objeto; levemente los palpan, levemente; pero, cada vez más inquietos, uno a uno los abandonan y, como vuelos de pájaros prisioneros, mis miradas chocan contra todas las cosas.

Extranjero venido de un país infinito en que ninguna cosa ha menester de límites, mi corazón atribulado no comprende el porqué de esta celda, de estos muebles extraños, de esta ventana por donde penetra un sol pequeño y descolorido.

¡Oh, gran sol de mediodía, para los recién llegados a la vida dispersa eres sólo un nuevo y mezquino detalle en esta hora del despertar!

¿Dónde estabas ¡oh, sol! cuando yo dormía? ¿Dónde las
pálidas luces, los grises caminos, los horribos pueblos? ¿Dónde
los oscuros deseos, las trémulas voces, la honda inquietud de mi
nueva conciencia? (93-95)

This is a text about intermediaries, about an ambiguous dream state in which the speaker sees “objects” without any cognitive or interpretative preconceptions--an ideal state beyond discursive distinctions. His gaze “hits” things but cannot acknowledge them in their concrete dimension: the sun is “pequeño y descolorido.” The “nueva conciencia” of the dreamer is elusive, since it is only possible in a subconscious state which he cannot represent. Like Julián del Casal’s “Japonería,” and its representation of the deceptive and impossible Chimera, this text refers to a “shadow” that is superior to the “cell” where the speaker wakes up--an empty realm that is nevertheless more fulfilling than the waking world: the space of the dream is thus paradoxically void. The “vague and monstrous murmur” left in it alludes to the poema en prosa which, like the objects of the speaker’s dream, cannot have “menester de límites,” because it is in an intermediate position where things are not what they appear to be. Like the sun that is seen differently by the dreamer, the prose of the poema en prosa lacks the legitimacy of narrative. The speaker’s discourse has no authority; he does not control the boundaries between truth and falsehood. He therefore loses his knowledge upon waking up, and with it, the contradictory discourse that represented it. The light and the colors of reality are thus incomparable to the “infinite country” he has just left. The poema en prosa is about its own “double-voicedness” and incapacity to find a totalizing discourse to encompass “el hondo espacio que el sueño dejara en mí.” Duality and indeterminacy create a dialogic dynamism within the text, in which the

internal world is more vivid than the external world. The ambiguity of its objects conforms to its heteroglossic discourse.

Prado's poemas en prosa make repeated reference to this unformalized state in which objects are not what they appear to be. In "Deseo sin nombre," he says: ". . . Deseo sin nombre, objeto sin forma, finalidad sin límites, tú arraigas como un árbol monstruoso que crece y crece sin cesar, y muere sin que alcance a florecer jamás . . ." (Los pájaros errantes 98). The speaker desires a "formless" object that has no delimited "finality"; the ideal entity is an incessantly expanding "monstrous tree" that is never actualized in its form. Unable to "flourish," it grows into mutations that ultimately cannot embody what it is. Similarly, in "Respuestas a los niños," Prado asserts:

. . . Bien comprendéis vosotros, ¡oh niños insaciables! que un guijarro no es todo lo visible de un guijarro.

Saber es lograr que las cosas se tornen transparentes como cristales. Entonces la mirada, lejos de tropezar en ellas, las atraviesa, y sus contornos son como marcos de ventanas que se abren. Y así, una cosa sólo vale por la nueva perspectiva del mundo que ella encierra y nos ofrece." (Los pájaros errantes 117)

The speaker conveys a pre-rational and primordial knowledge through a discourse directed at children. The image of a pebble contains his vision of a multifaceted reality beyond appearances. An object represents not its form but its internal and unreified possibilities, like the discourse that Bakhtin identifies as a means of societal transformation. The pebble is thus a "joya perdida que nadie encontrará en la vasta extensión de la playa desierta," he says in "El guijarro" (Los pájaros errantes 68). It remains unrecognized because of its indistinct and uniform appearance, like the undistinguishable form of the

poema en prosa. The process of the pebble's creation is contained within its own form, as the genre itself: "Te mueves, cambias, vas y vienes y todo lo haces dentro de ti mismo" ("El guijarro," Los pájaros errantes 67). The form of the poema en prosa, like that of the pebble, has internalized the forces that lead to its creation. Weeds, in another poema en prosa, also embody the inconspicuous subversiveness of the pebble; they are metaphorical of the incommensurability of sameness, or the endless capacity of a problematic formlessness. In "Las malezas," Prado says: ". . . Porque son insignificantes nadie repara en la forma y color de sus pétalos y de sus hojas, y son mil veces más variadas que las flores de los jardines más soberbios. Sus semillas finas y abundantes, como nada esperan del hombre que las odia y las persigue, han aprendido a navegar sobre el agua, a volar en el viento. . ." (Los pájaros errantes 139). The ideal form is one which is always different, like the uncontrollable weeds that go unacknowledged: their form is "insignificante" but can generate an unpredictable multiplicity, as that of the poema en prosa.

Like the "fragments" in which Schlegel framed his theoretical insights, the short and concentrated genre of the poema en prosa "radically question[s] the very principle of organic unity and coherence" (Monroe 60). In this respect, it is pertinent to allow for a definition of the poema en prosa by Max Jacob, who asserts that it "must possess that style which is not the writer's own speech but 'the working of materials, the buildup of the whole'" (qtd. in Soucy, "Difficulties" 60). Jacob points to that quality of the novel which Bakhtin had emphasized in his theory of dialogism, and which enabled him to develop its significant role as a social and political redeemer of the popular discourses previously obliterated in the dominant rhetoric. Novelistic discourse is, for Bakhtin, inherently ideological, insofar as it contains, through prose, a constant reworking of the

forces at play in society. The dialogic tension of the poema en prosa has similarly been linked to its role in social transformation, making it, as Monroe asserts, “the very locus of class struggle within literature” (Monroe 19). Writers’ attempt to use it to transcend genre have not only aesthetic but sociopolitical consequences. For Monroe, the “concentrated dialogical struggle” of the poema en prosa makes it the ground for formal oppositions that have social repercussions. In mixing the traditionally literary with the non-literary, “the reader is brought close to the voices themselves,” asserts Anne-Marie Soucy, endowing it with a social function (“Difficulties” 57). She further defines it as a “counter-discursive structure,” responsible for the “representation of the social consciousness” (“Baudelaire’s” 42). Its destabilizing capacity suggests the arbitrariness of all constructions, aesthetic as well as social. Indeed, Soucy defines the poema en prosa essentially as a form of revolutionary, or rather post-revolutionary, dimensions, in which “violence and shock” are “internalized” (“Baudelaire’s” 45).

The poema en prosa allows the interpenetration of multiple discourses that are proved contingent; in it, the literary and the non-literary are in constant struggle. This dialogism constitutes the basis for a continuous self-formulation; the merging of poetry and prose represents “opposing discourses wrestling with one another for positions of dominance and/or for self-preservation” (Monroe 18). The aesthetic conflict is also a conflict of those ideologies that place lyric above prose:

Dragging the lyric into what Bakhtin calls “a zone of contact with reality” (39)--what for our purposes we may call the prosaic--the prose poem turns this privileged “poetic” form of the eternal present--and its correlate, self-presence--into a cliché to be

smashed, form-ulating it so as to indicate what forms we have become and need to break out of. (Monroe 27)

The poema en prosa is thus continually struggling to liberate its voices from a fixed structure in order to destroy hierarchies and categorization, while creating at the same time a framework for confrontation. For Monroe, this leads to “the partial restoration of lost voices whose prosaic speech and everyday struggles--the struggle, among other things, for the power of speech--have been considered by generations of writers and critics unworthy of literary attention” (10).

The poema en prosa is the result of ideals such as those of José Martí, who anticipated an aesthetic and political renovation that would give voice to the unique confluence of foreign and autochthonous forces in Spanish America. The cultural diversity of the continent prompted a new aesthetic and social configuration. Julio Ramos claims, for instance, that the proliferation of languages prevalent in Spanish America throughout its history prompted political and social change, adding, “as Pasolini showed with respect to Italy, the novel’s heteroglossia becomes politically significant, especially in moments when the homogeneity of the national language is felt to be problematic” (32). Precisely this flight from the legitimacy of an established discourse contradicts homogenizing figures such as Andrés Bello, whose Gramática de la lengua castellana aims at a naively cohesive expression and identity at the expense of the voices of the continent. The poema en prosa, particularly in the Spanish American tradition, where discourse is meant to emulate foreign prescriptions, has the capacity to actualize the heteroglossia of a society that has repressed its own ideological forces. Discursive forms that resist classification can thus effect social transformation.

The Spanish American poema en prosa, as in the case of Prado's texts, often reflects the duality of the seemingly superficial world of everyday objects, staging social and aesthetic conflicts. Pablo Neruda attempts to capture the internal discourse of objects in his poema en prosa, "Sobre una poesía sin pureza," where the idealized world of poetry is confronted with the disturbing world of prose. His "impure poetry" borrows from the smells and textures of everyday objects:

Es muy conveniente, en ciertas horas del día o de la noche, observar profundamente los objetos en descanso: Las ruedas que han recorrido largas, polvorientas distancias, soportando grandes cargas vegetales o minerales, los sacos de las carbonerías, los barriles, las cestas, los mangos y asas de los instrumentos del carpintero. De ellos se desprende el contacto del hombre y de la tierra como una lección para el torturado poeta lírico. Las superficies usadas, el gasto que las manos han infligido a las cosas, la atmósfera a menudo trágica y siempre patética de estos objetos, infunde una especie de atracción no despreciable hacia la realidad del mundo . . . (1193)

Neruda is aware of the traces left in objects, of the prosaic side of reality to which the poet is irremediably attracted. This poema en prosa attests to the discourse of the "tortured lyric poet," who cannot deal with the world of concrete objects--of prose--because he is tormented by his own self-centered expression which, for Bakhtin, is undialogical. Neruda exhorts poets to concentrate on the "profundidad de las cosas" in order to reach into "una poesía impura como un traje, como un cuerpo, con manchas de nutrición" (1193). He wants poetic discourse to incorporate the quotidian subjectivity of

objects, which bear “el contacto del hombre.” Like the novel, the poema en prosa interweaves those voices that are confronted in society with the simplicity of “hungered bodies.” The act of juxtaposing prose and poetry transforms the relation of the individual to society; the lyric voice is drastically placed within the “historical situatedness of the individual subject in concrete relations of gender and class,” explains Monroe (29), who claims that the very existence of the poema en prosa tends to infuse its age with a certain awareness of the concrete reality to which it is witness, namely, the “prosaic aspects of daily life” (28). The “realidad del mundo,” unlike the reality of the lyric poet, is intrinsically social and aesthetic. The intersection of discourses of the poema en prosa creates a pleasure superior to the purely aesthetic pleasure of the poetic realm: Neruda’s text thus favors the “superficies usadas” of objects. These are a “torture” for the lyric poet because they are inexorably beyond discourse.

In order to define the paradoxical discourse of the poema en prosa, the genre has been generally described in terms of its characteristic style, that is, of its pictorial and musical traits, which are a direct legacy of its Parnassian and Symbolist origins. Accordingly, its fragmentary imagery has been associated with impressionism (Díaz-Plaja 22), as evinced by Aloysius Bertrand’s Gaspard de la nuit, notably subtitled Fantaisies à la manière de Rembrandt et de Callot. In turn, its rhythmic prose has been associated with the melodiousness of music. Not coincidentally, Maurice Ravel put Gaspard de la nuit to music in 1908, and other composers, such as Claude Debussy, created songs out of prose poems by Pierre Louÿs, as well as Verlaine, Baudelaire, and Mallarmé (Helguera 69). These adaptations of the poema en prosa indicate how it has traditionally been viewed in terms of the poetic or musical dimension of its prose: “Analizamos, pues, el más importante fenómeno de la literatura de

nuestro tiempo: el de la creación de un lenguaje capaz de alcanzar--sin los elementos propios del verso--la tensión y el 'clima' propios de la poesía" (Díaz-Plaja 25). Díaz-Plaja ties the originality of the poema en prosa to its formal characteristics, which are considered to be akin to those of "artistic prose." But the singularity of the poema en prosa, within its intermediate domain, lies precisely in its subversion of such formal categorizations. Thus as Tom Beebee asserts, to define the poema en prosa with regard to "whether [it] is a giving of form to prose or a removal of the constraints of form from poetry," presupposes the erasure of one genre or another (52), and diminishes the uniqueness of the phenomenon. Beebee sees the poema en prosa as "constituted by an absence of form" (52), producing a form/content dichotomy that reduces the poema en prosa to its superficial characteristics as a block text and not as a discursive contradiction. Here lies the fundamental ambiguity of the poema en prosa, in which the lack of prescriptive "form" uncovers a transgressive discursive category: it is a form contained or generated by the reader.

Critics are continually grappling for parameters by which to base their judgments of the poema en prosa, and to find one fixed condition that makes it a unified whole, in order to legitimize it as an autonomous form. Hermine Riffaterre looks for internal "constants" to justify the existence of a poetic element within the poema en prosa that will provide it with closure, which, along with brevity, is the one quality universally acknowledged to be present in the genre (101). Similarly, Michael Riffaterre finds a unifying criterion in the intertextuality within the poema en prosa, which defines how the apparent anomalies of the text make sense once they are seen to appeal to a level of signification beyond that of the text, that is, to the "intertext" (119). Most readers agree that the poema en prosa is self-constituted as a form, and that therein lies

its capacity for innovation: "Its defining characteristic is its own self-definition. Having no necessary exterior framework, no meter or essential form, it must organize itself from within and find there its own center of gravity, its own hearth of energy, its own intimate depth of understanding" (Caws 181). The poema en prosa defines in each instance the mechanisms that make it work and that give it necessary unity and closure. Rather than having a theoretical framework within which to be inscribed, the poema en prosa plays out its internal difficulties in its own form. It must be analyzed on its own terms. The marginal position to which it has been relegated throughout its history is a direct product of the impossibility of generalizing or theorizing from outside its boundaries.

In this unstable genre, the cognitive gaps of poetry are contained within the deceptive cohesiveness of prose, creating sometimes arbitrary and unexpected signification. Many prose poems, especially those that fall within the bounds of the French avant-garde, are characterized by seeming incoherence and require a corresponding mode of interpretation to find meaning within apparent chaos:

In the prose poem, the final framing edge is of especial importance, acting retrospectively to construct or destruct what has been built. Here, a single-line stoppage may resume and contain the previous steps in the poem leading to it, or may cast in an entirely different light the picture made until that point. This forms the limit of our knowledge. (Caws 180-81)

Mary Ann Caws's innovative analysis precludes fixed cognitive boundaries and incorporates theory into the praxis of the poema en prosa, as a genre that thrives on self-referentiality, defining itself as it is being created. The effect is that of a narrative that does not take for granted its own rhetorical authority, and

that implicitly questions its capacity to be definitive. Prose is, after all, an arbitrary imposition of a structure on language as much as poetry: “Se supone que la prosa está más cerca de la realidad que la poesía. Entiendo que es un error,” asserts Jorge Luis Borges (104). If prose is neither more exact nor more objective than poetry, and if both are, as Borges says, equally aesthetic phenomena, then what is it that distinguishes them?

The poema en prosa seems to resolve this dilemma by attaining an irreducible expression that subjects form to content, creating a kind of self-generating totality which eludes genre categorizations: “The difference between the prose poem and the verse poem is that in the latter the formal framework has permanent characteristics peculiar to all its meanings, to all the texts the author wishes to insert. In the prose poem, on the contrary, the formal framework is ad hoc, built out of the content put into it and coextensive with it” (H. Riffaterre 115). Form is created out of content, or rather it is generated simultaneously with it. Each poema en prosa is an intermediate expression in prose/poetry that eludes a form/content distinction. Its development is not explicit because it does not appeal to narrative elements but rather uses the appearance of prose to organize its own meanings. More than in any other genre, form and content are interdependent. Because of its freedom of self-definition, the poema en prosa is capable of an incessantly renewing structure. New relations are formed as the internal logic of the poema en prosa is unveiled.

Perhaps it is inevitable that poetry turns into prose once the former becomes free verse, a phenomenon defined by E. K. Mapes as “marcar sobre el papel las divisiones del pensamiento, conforme éstas se manifiestan naturalmente, de modo que cada división forme un verso. El número de

sílabas de un verso determinado no se sujeta, pues, a pauta alguna” (3).

When there are no rules of versification, there is no principle preventing the poem from becoming prose. If thought is represented in writing without any formal restriction, there is a risk that the internalized expression may become obscure and impenetrable. The prose of the poema en prosa represents that abysmal gesture of venturing out of form, but restraining a total release into emptiness, demonstrating the contingency of rhetoric. This is a discourse that follows what Soucy calls “the prose drama of consciousness” (“Difficulties” 62), a manifestation of the struggle taking place in the reader to sort out the categories under which expression falls. Soucy describes, with reference to “Les ponts,” from Rimbaud’s Illuminations, how the genre deceives the reader into discursive paths that end up being proved decisively rhetorical:

Descriptive elements are packed densely in a row, suggesting likely paths of narrative that are never followed . . . The little description, with its narrative leads, was building toward nothing, was in fact a comedy and instantly expendable. The narrative elements were all tiny guises to keep alive a certain interest in following the sentences, yet insofar as we responded to this as plot we were being drawn into a trap. Abruptly the prose poem closes on us, the descriptive and narrative elements proving to be pretexts of the writer’s authority. What seemed genuine reference to the outer world was in fact a joking allusion to our propensity to respond to a text as scene and process; after all, the text proves to be only, but splendidly language. (“Difficulties” 60)

The superficial appearance of the poema en prosa as prose, and its fragmented imagery, engage us only to make us ultimately aware of its

artificiality.

It is interesting to note that the three major Spanish American women poets of the transitional decades of the early part of the century, Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957), Alfonsina Storni (1892-1938), and Juana de Ibarbourou (1895-1979), all wrote collections of poemas en prosa. Storni furthermore considered her only book of poemas en prosa, Poemas de amor (1926), her most important achievement, despite the scarce critical attention it received (Jones 76). These poets were perhaps drawn to the uncreated aspect of the poema en prosa, which appears to be exempt from the connotations of male-dominated literary forms. The genre's internal cohesiveness, and its resistance to a univocal discourse, may have offered them the freedom to create their own expression. Mistral's attention to the poema en prosa runs through her entire opus, from those in her first collection of poetry, Desolación (1922), to those of Elogio de las cosas de la tierra (1979), published posthumously. These "elogios" or praises have the quality of intimate portraits of things she admires in nature and in the quotidian life of the simple people. They allow her to remain in the ambiguity of multiple poetic voices that symbolize her view of human universality; through the poema en prosa, the poet represents the ultimate alterity of a discourse that does not conform to its own restrictive voice. Mistral thus gives voice to silenced objects, as in "Pan," her praise of bread:

Vicio de la costumbre. Maravilla de la infancia, sentido mágico de las materias y los elementos: harina, sal, aceite, agua, fuego.

Momentos de visión pura, de audición pura, de palpación pura.

La conciencia de la vida en un momento. Todos los recuerdos en torno de un pan.

Una sensación muy fuerte de vida trae consigo por no sé qué

aproximación interior, un pensamiento igualmente poderoso de la muerte. El pensamiento de la vida se banaliza desde el momento en que no se mezcla al de la muerte. Los vitales puros son grandes superficiales o pequeños paganos. El pagano se ocupó de las dos cosas. (Elogio 76)

In this non-linear and impressionistic narrative, bread, the most tangible and quotidian element, is the paradoxically elusive matter that generates absolute sensations, parallel to Prado's intermediate oneiric consciousness: "conciencia de la vida en un momento." This perception belongs to a pre-rational, childlike state: it is a "maravilla de la infancia." The quintessential bread is transmuted in memory and creates "pure" perceptions. The poema en prosa portrays the vertiginous awareness of totality through a single image that, because it multiplies itself, cannot be localized in a particular idea. Objects can be represented "magically" around bread. Through a certain "aproximación interior," discourse attains the fusion of extremes: expression becomes banal if it does not integrate both life and death. The hermetic last few sentences point toward this irreducibility of opposites: "Los vitales puros son grandes superficiales o pequeños paganos. El pagano se ocupó de las dos cosas." The fluctuation between the "superficial" and the "pagan," the poetic and the prosaic, is ultimately asserted in the discourse of the poema en prosa, this "pagan" that is both but neither. Bread is thus the means toward a dialogic integration of opposing forces. Just as the heteroglossia of the novel endows it with an irreducible potential, the lack of linearity and the multivoicedness of this poema en prosa, where the quotidian contains "pure moments," integrates the struggle of a discourse and a society in transformation.

Juana de Ibarbourou's second publication was a collection of poemas

en prosa, El cántaro fresco (1920), in which her characteristically succinct prose describes objects similar to those that concerned Mistral: nature (“La mariposa,” “Los grillos,” “El trigo,” “Los parrales,” “Las chicharras,” “La luna,” “La lluvia,” “El nido”); and its role in the ephemerality of life (“Melancolía,” “Presentimientos,” “Angustia,” “Alma de llama,” “Transmigraciones,” “Puñados de polvo”). These poemas en prosa employ an intimist tone to describe quotidian aspects of the poet’s experience of nature and her enthusiastic perception of its meanings. The genre becomes a means for Ibarbourou’s reflections on the paradoxes of life, and on the forces continually struggling for a place in discourse. In “Noches de lluvia,” she explores the contrast between her comfortable existence and that of the common person:

Yo amo las noches de lluvia. Son de una intimidad intensa y dulce como si nuestra casa se convirtiera, de pronto, en el único refugio tibio e iluminado del universo . . .

Me imagino mi casa, entonces, como un pequeño y vivo diamante apretado entre el puño de un negro gigantesco. ¡Qué beatitud! Hago por dormirme para gozar esas horas de gracia propicias al ensueño y al amor. Pero a veces, también, me asalta de pronto la visión de pobres ranchos agujereados, de chicos friolentos, de mujeres que no tienen como yo una casa tibia ni una abrigada cama blanda y para quienes estas noches así son un suplicio. Y entonces sí, me esfuerzo por dormir. Ya que no puedo remediar yo sola su infinita miseria, les doy el sacrificio de la conciencia de mi bienestar. Me duermo, me duermo, avergonzada de paladear un gozo que atormenta a millares de seres humanos. (617-18)

This text shifts from a naive and satisfied perception of nature to an awareness of the implications of the privilege of the speaker's perspective. As in Mistral's text, Ibarbourou's poema en prosa integrates the opposing voices of society. Her expression contains its own reversal, as the speaker realizes that her pleasure is another's torment--that rain can create the most blissful and also the most appalling sensations. Deep introspection and unsettling physical discomfort are simultaneously contained within the speaker's discourse. Her house constitutes a refuge; it is a self-contained realm which symbolizes the unitary poetic discourse defined by Bakhtin, which therefore precludes dialogism. This homogenizing voice is abruptly undermined by its position within "el puño de un negro gigantesco" that suddenly makes the speaker aware of her unstable pleasure--"un gozo que atormenta a millares de seres humanos." The only sacrifice the speaker can make is to attain "conciencia de mi bienestar" and to sleep instead of taking pleasure in her condition. This symbolic sacrifice represents the interiorization of the dialogic struggle into her discourse, which is resolved in sleep. Prose is thus the means of disrupting the idealized poetic realm and infusing it with social conscience.

Perhaps the poet who realizes best the dialogic freedom of the poema en prosa in Spanish America is the Venezuelan José Antonio Ramos Sucre (1890-1930). Largely misunderstood by the critics of his time, Ramos Sucre was the only poet of the early part of the century who wrote exclusively poemas en prosa, disregarding the practice of versified lyric predominant in Spanish American literature of this time: "En ningún otro escritor la crítica oficializada anduvo tan errada como en el caso de Ramos Sucre. El desconcierto e incomprensión ante su obra alcanzó niveles increíbles" (Medina 4). Practically denied of the title of poet, he remained forgotten for almost 20 years after his

death, until the resurrection of his work in the 1950s by a generation of writers who rediscovered its precocious modernity. The problematic nature of his work, consisting entirely of hermetic and apocalyptic poemas en prosa, marginalized Ramos Sucre as a cryptic and anachronistic figure in Venezuelan letters, until his recent emergence as one of the most original poets in Spanish America. Arturo Uslar Pietri, Venezuelan critic and writer, attributes Ramos Sucre a perfectly-crafted language that transcends time and tradition, and distills forms and images to create an œuvre that is “refinada, fantasmagórica e intemporal” (7):

En vida se le consideraba como un ser extraño y como un poeta anacrónico, fuera del tiempo. Después de su muerte se ha reconocido, con toda justicia, el gran valor literario de su obra y ha comenzado el inútil trabajo de los críticos para clasificarlo. Se ha dicho que era un post-modernista que recogía, a su manera, los últimos ecos de preciosismo y exquisitez cosmopolita de los seguidores de Rubén Darío. Evidentemente no es eso. (7)

Uslar Pietri believes that Ramos Sucre’s unclassifiable opus has an historical context that is tangential to modernismo and postmodernismo. He was a singular figure who recreated highly personal visions and obsessions that, in the 1920s, opened the way for the next generations of poets.

Apparently chaotic and fragmentary, Ramos Sucre’s poemas en prosa follow a labyrinthian path of sensations, images, oneiric allusions, and transpositions of identity that effect fluidity and inconclusiveness. Its voices are representations of an aesthetic consciousness that avoids realist connotation, often mixing mythical and historical allusions and emphasizing the formal and rhetorical aspect of language. The titles of these poemas en prosa include “El

escudero de Eneas, Il. 1,49,” “Geórgicas,” “Los secretos de la Odisea,” “Los gallos de la noche de Elsinor,” “El secreto del Nilo,” from his three collections of poemas en prosa, La torre de timón (1925), El cielo de esmalte, and Las formas del fuego (both of 1929). These works avoid narrative linearity to produce an evocative and otherworldly presence. In “Nocturno,” Ramos Sucre attains this presence through an inconclusive imagery that links subjects, voices, and meanings in an inexorable and mysterious purposelessness:

Quise hospedarme solo en la casa de portada plateresca. Me
esforcé mucho tiempo restableciendo el uso de los cerrojos. Mis
pasos herían el suelo sonoro y descomponían la vieja alfombra
de polvo.

Sujetos de formas vanas apagaban los fanales al empezar la
noche, rodeándome de tinieblas agónicas, y el edificio de dos
pisos desaparecía en la semejanza de una cabellera desatada
por el huracán.

Yo esperaba ansiosamente un prodigio.

He visto una mujer de fisionomía noble, de rasgos esculpidos
por la memoria de un pesar. Ocupaba una rotura súbita de la
sombra y acercaba el rostro a la cabecera de un féretro.

La fractura de una fiola de cristal despedía un sonido
armonioso y la fantasmagoría zozobraba en la oscuridad
impenetrable. (328)

All forms take part in this chaos of relations where multiple threads of narrative are allowed to converge in a void of meaninglessness. The text’s recurrent image is of things that have ceased to have their original purpose, alluding to the arbitrariness of language. The speaker wants to inhabit the “casa de

portada plateresca,” which alludes to Juan Ramón Jiménez, the Spanish modernista who wrote Platero y yo (1907-16), considered the preeminent example of poetic prose in Spanish literature. This is the house of language--it has a “portada” or cover that evokes Jiménez’s famous character. Ramos Sucre’s poet has to restore to their function the locks of a discursive house that is falling apart. He wants to “fix” the forms of this language that has been dismantled. Forms are mutable and “vanas,” or useless. In this hermetic space, every movement and sensation of the speaker generates an effect on expression: a broken crystal creates a harmonious sound; and his steps “hurt” the “suelo sonoro,” alluding once again to the “wound” of discourse created by the poema en prosa.

This constitutes an arbitrary discourse where things are transformed without agency and without purpose: “Sujetos de formas vanas apagaban los faros al empezar la noche, rodeándome de tinieblas agónicas.” The lamps are illogically turned off during the night, when he remains in the darkness that transforms identities as multiple as threads of hair during the unsettling winds of a hurricane. The objects around him seem to control the narrative; they act while he passively gives voice to “sujetos,” “una mujer,” “una fiola de cristal.” In this incoherent discursive realm, illusions and forms are fractured, signalling how discourse itself is questioned: “el edificio de dos pisos desaparecía en la semejanza de una cabellera desatada.” The poet interns himself deliberately within a structure that disappears, as if signaling the precariousness of his expression; he must therefore wait for “un prodigio.” A woman of noble features appears inside a “broken” shadow and is approaching a corpse, an allusion to the stagnation of language. Meaning fluctuates among lifeless symbols that exacerbate simultaneously their arbitrariness and precision.

Ramos Sucre creates a closed system of apparently random allusions that have no particular referent. The narrative has no other purpose than to explore its own images; and there is no plot other than the intercalation of reported sensations. The narrative remains inconclusive, announcing a mystery that will never be consummated within the bounds of the poema en prosa--"un prodigio." A static and detached language magnifies the sense of mystery of the text. The riddle of the poema en prosa is the riddle of language, as it is in every poema en prosa that actualizes the heteroglossia of discourse: How can language be original if it is a reworking of all the voices of society and a product of rhetorical categories? Through their dialogism, the voices in the poema en prosa overcome the finality that would condition them to a singular origin or space.

Just as Ramos Sucre's text reestablishes the use of objects and forms beyond their everyday capacity, the poema en prosa creates new relations through its contradictory reliance and rejection of its constituting categories. The ultimate paradox this genre elicits, and the one through which it achieves its greatest deception, is the confirmation that there is no ultimate distinction between prose and poetry. As Monroe points out, this distinction only exists in the written form, that is, visually and in terms of length. It no longer exists in terms of content or language, or in terms of performance, that is, the Greek basis of the distinction between drama, lyric, and epic (50). Nowadays, as Soucy explains, the very issue of these oppositions has been "displaced," to generate "a crisis no longer between verse and prose, or poem and criticism, but within each of these designations and consequently within the notion of crisis itself" ("Baudelaire's" 43).

The poema en prosa is a manifestation of the state in which the denial of

discursive categories takes place; in a sense, the gesture of the poema en prosa, which depends on the interaction of genres, is that of erasing them in order to restore them again. It embodies that paradoxical condition of literature, which cannot elude boundaries and yet only attains meaningfulness once it somehow transgresses rhetorical limitations. Just as the objects of Ramos Sucre's incoherent house occupy an arbitrary space that is interpreted anew, the Spanish American poema en prosa questions its own paradoxical form to create unpredictable discursive relations. As the culmination of the progression of versified poetry towards formal freedom, the poema en prosa is an inevitable discursive move; it is the site of confrontation of the artificial constraints beyond which there can be, however, no expression. What does a poem in free verse become once it takes one step further into formlessness? The poema en prosa is a manifestation of this recognition, which is both the strength and the weakness of the genre. We do ultimately have to ask, like Soucy, if it relies "for its being on the instability of discourse types and genre forms" ("Difficulties" 53).

This self-defeating genre can attain what no particular form per se could accomplish in the project of liberating Spanish American discourse from fixed formal prescriptions. It is the problematic site where multiple genres, voices, and traditions converge to generate an incessant self-questioning of discourse. The simultaneously critical and creative intersections of the poema en prosa enable an unprecedented awareness of the antecedents that make up Spanish American tradition. To write a poema en prosa is to evoke Romanticist and Symbolist predecessors, but it is also to take part in the struggle to go beyond those discourses into a self-generating and original "counter-discourse" that is forever new and unpredictable, untheorizable, newly reasserting the creative capacity of language.

Conclusion:
Two Contemporary Practitioners
of the poema en prosa

The poema en prosa is a subversive element in contemporary Spanish American literature because it embodies the culmination of centuries of discursive and social struggles for self-definition. It is the one literary form where the efforts of such crusaders as Martí for a genuine Spanish American expression reach fruition. The contributions of generations of poets who embraced the universal scope of Martí's Americanist ideals were made possible in large measure by the liberating capacity of the poema en prosa. The context in which this genre achieved a subversion of literary categories is relevant even today. German Romanticism is still a conceptual mode in which contemporary debates about rhetorical and literary categories are continuously pursued. Contemporary critical issues are, as Timothy Clark has shown, "the persistent concern of literature with questions of its own essence and its problematic relation to philosophy; the concomitant break-down of any rigorous distinction between the theory and the practice of literature; the advocacy of radical experimentation" (232). Many literary questions still revolve around the Romantic "reckoning of poetry as a movement of consciousness in the act of (self) conception" (233). The ideals put forth in Schlegel's aphoristic theory, and the transcendence of definitions and categories through which he analyzed discourse, remain a contending force in the contemporary critical debate where, as Tzvetan Todorov has argued, "l'évolution de la littérature

moderne consiste précisément à faire de chaque œuvre une interrogation sur l'être même de la littérature" (Les genres 44). The discourse of literature is acknowledged to be inherently suspicious of its own boundaries and classification. Texts are viewed by theoreticians such as Todorov as autonomous, self-constituting entities, but the concept of genre is, more than ever, a paradoxical means of exploring the possibilities of literary discourse.

This paradox, manifested openly in the poema en prosa, provides contemporary Spanish American poets room for innovation and discursive autonomy, beyond the constraints of conventional genres. The contemporary poema en prosa employs a coded, self-referential language that plays with its own artificiality as a predetermined discourse. Two women writers, Alejandra Pizarnik (1936-1972) and Giannina Braschi (b. 1958), one Argentinean, the other Puerto Rican, one surrealist, the other post-modern, present such texts. Both employ the poema en prosa as a means to dissect language, objectified and sterile, as an explicit object of contention. For Pizarnik, who favors predominantly this form, language is a metaphor of her infernal alienation: "Las fuerzas del lenguaje son las damas solitarias, desoladas, que cantan a través de mi voz que escucho a lo lejos. Y lejos, en la negra arena, yace una niña densa de música ancestral . . ." (75). The poet cannot identify with her own displaced voice, evoking an irrecuperable music. Pizarnik attempts to speak outside of language, outside of a "house," unlike Ramos Sucre's cryptic image, that explicitly alludes to its discursiveness: "Cuando a la casa del lenguaje se le vuela el tejado y las palabras no guarecen, yo hablo" (75). She does not feel safe within the structure of language, because she speaks in a duplicitous region of discourse that is neither prose nor poetry, where language is no longer "protective"--it is an incomplete house. This void structure is

emblematic of Julián del Casal's Chimerical vase and its consequent deception. Since the speaker of Pizarnik's text cannot trust words, they have to be transmuted into her body in order to recover some meaningfulness: ". . . Ojalá pudiera vivir solamente en éxtasis, haciendo el cuerpo del poema con mi cuerpo, rescatando cada frase con mis días y con mis semanas, infundiéndole al poema mi soplo a medida que cada letra de cada palabra haya sido sacrificada en las ceremonias del vivir" (95). Letters are "sacrificed" in a ceremony that restores their meaning. Empty words need to merge with the concreteness of life in order to recover some legitimacy.

The contemporary Spanish American poema en prosa, like most artistic expression after the Symbolists, cannot presuppose an exact identity between form and content, a correspondence of language with the world. This awareness is evident in Pizarnik's work, whose poemas en prosa are suffused by the recognition of their own rhetoricity and incapacity to reach outside of their own textual limits. Thus in her poema en prosa, "Piedra fundamental," she affirms: "No es esto, tal vez, lo que quiero decir. Este decir y decirse no es grato. No puedo hablar con mi voz sino con mis voces. También este poema es posible que sea una trampa, un escenario más" (93). Pizarnik considers the discourse in which she speaks a trap because it is superficially not a poem, and therefore subjects her to the abyss of formlessness where she is allowed to renounce a stable identity.

Pizarnik's expression is suspended in a dismal mutability generated by the discourse's inability to define itself. Octavio Paz elucidates this indeterminacy by asserting that "por la poesía, el lenguaje recobra su ser original, vuelve a ser música" (Cuadrivio 38). For Paz, music somehow resolves the gap of signification of the poema en prosa: "Song is neither

discourse nor explanation” (Other Voice 9). The muses, after all, have their origin in music, but music is non-rational. The traditional pairing of poetry with music and prose with rationality, which led to Plato’s ideal of integrating the two as a foundation for his Republic, is disrupted in the poema en prosa. The poema en prosa is a rhetorical form where music and meaning are joined through the subversion of form. This almost indistinct entity is able to contain an expression that both mocks and asserts the fundamental elusiveness of expression.

The musicality of the poema en prosa exacerbates its disconcerting sense of displacement, where the poet cannot be one with language. Pizarnik alludes to music to signal her simultaneous rejection and adherence to a changing and unstable language. She searches for her own discourse within a means of expression deliberately elusive, as in this poem, “Piedra fundamental,” from a collection entitled “El infierno musical”:

Yo quería que mis dedos de muñeca penetraran en las teclas. Yo no quería rozar, como una araña, el teclado. Yo quería hundirme, clavarme, fijarme, petrificarme. Yo quería entrar en el teclado para entrar adentro de la música para tener una patria. Pero la música se movía, se apresuraba. Sólo cuando un refrán reincidía, alentaba en mí la esperanza de que se estableciera algo parecido a una estación de trenes, quiero decir: un punto de partida firme y seguro; un lugar desde el cual partir, desde el lugar, hacia el lugar, en unión y fusión con el lugar. Pero el refrán era demasiado breve, de modo que yo no podía fundar una estación pues no contaba más que con un tren algo salido de los rieles que se contorsionaba y se distorsionaba. Entonces

abandoné la música y sus traiciones porque la música estaba más arriba o más abajo pero no en el centro, en el lugar de la fusión y del encuentro. (Tú que fuiste mi única patria ¿en dónde buscarte? Tal vez en este poema que voy escribiendo.)

(Poemas 92)

Pizarnik's poema en prosa aims at an objective, fixed rhythm whose scale or keyboard is a stable reference point; but there is no certainty that the notes played are themselves. There is a prevailing sense that language is continually distorted as it moves beyond its "tracks." Consequently, meaning is "más arriba o más abajo pero no en el centro, en el lugar de la fusión y del encuentro." In the mutable space of the poema en prosa, resonances shift incessantly as they are not solidified in the permanence of a fixed rhetoric; there is no center or "punto de partida firme y seguro." Hers is, in fact, "una retórica agrietada, la escritura de la contradicción," according to Lydia Evangelista (43). Therefore she can only write within a "musical hell," an eternally reverberating but flawed construction that continually threatens to let her fall into its abyss. The improvisations of the poema en prosa enact an unsettling awareness of the inability of discourse to overcome its arbitrariness and dislocation. This is why the genre is difficult to define, and why, nevertheless, Pizarnik can use its contradictions so ably to express her own sense of insufficiency.

The outward appearance of the poema en prosa as prose thus constitutes a deceptive façade that initially grounds the structure on something familiar and understandable. But once the genre's paradoxical freedom is actualized in the poetic voice, the text becomes an abysmal space where no interpretative boundaries remain. As Monroe put it, the poema en prosa is

intrinsically “a genre of provocation” (75) that conceals as a means of signifying. Not only does it problematize the notion of the literary by subverting the notion of genre, but it also turns the poetic endeavor into an effort simultaneously negating and redeeming. Like Casal’s and Darío’s texts, Pizarnik’s poema en prosa aims at a Chimerical plenitude that is subverted by its own intermediate discourse; her language, like the train, contorts unpredictably outside of its no longer functional tracks. For Spanish American poets, the eccentricity of the poema en prosa, like that of the train, enables their discourse to rebel against the ideological and aesthetic constraints of an imposed tradition.

Pizarnik’s search for a fulfilling expression is also the attempt to find a national identity--a “patria.” Thus Pizarnik recovers her “patria” in the poema en prosa, while distrusting the mechanisms of her own expression: she attains her voice only insofar as it can be dissolved and questioned within itself. Her discourse enacts the rebellion of the poema en prosa within a simultaneously self-generating and self-destructive textual space that aims toward a unique but inexpressible identity. Contemporary Spanish American writers assertively use this paradoxical genre both to establish and to transgress the poetics of Spanish America.

For Braschi, whose entire oeuvre so far consists of a series of connected poemas en prosa entitled El imperio de los sueños (1988), language has also lost its “ceiling,” but in this case it is a voluntary dismantling of the “house of language”: “Hoy el día ha saltado. Vengo volcado al revés, me dijo, y entonces yo le dije, ayúdame a bajar el techo y a ponerlo en la calle. Y luego trae la escalera y acuéstala en el piso. Si el mundo es así--me dije--que siempre sea así . . .” (20). The speaker disrupts the structure of language, and accepts its

loss of functionality. She places a ladder flat on the street, alluding to a reconstitution of the purpose of objects according to arbitrary and incoherent laws. Unlike modernista objects, which are employed as mutable symbols of a transcendental reality, Braschi's objects have lost their preconceived denomination:

Y entre tanto camino y tanto zapato viejo, entre tanta muchedumbre de objetos y preguntas, la mano ejerce su función de intérprete y sigue el aire soplando y sigue la puerta abriendo la cerradura y al cerrarse la puerta vuelve el viento a su lugar. Sí, todo tiene su lugar y todo pesa cuando los objetos se vacían en la puerta. Pero siento que hay algo que corre y que no tiene peso. Es algo que sube y no llega a descubrirse y tiene que esconderse en otra esquina. Y ese algo hace que se levanten las mismas preguntas. Y de repente el viento vuelve a concentrarse en un punto y sobre ese punto vuelan los silencios y vuelven los objetos a meterse en el cuadro. Entonces ya no se reconocen los objetos como si ya no fueran más objetos: reloj, espejo, imagen, viento. Pero mi mano conoce la caída y no hay otra pregunta que los objetos golpeando el marco y la silla. Y el aire sigue quieto y todo está en su lugar. (22)

The linearity that gives a precarious sense of direction to Braschi's text--the superficial transition from sentence to sentence--embodies the more profound displacement of a language that lingers on its own emptiness: "La mano ejerce su función de intérprete y sigue el aire soplando y sigue la puerta abriendo la cerradura y al cerrarse la puerta vuelve el viento a su lugar." The "hand," a particular undialectic means of expression, interprets the unspoken actions of

the air and wind, rather than language. These “void” and imperceptible elements are significantly unverifiable other than through their effect on things. Braschi’s poema en prosa expresses formally what it cannot say thematically, because to assert something in this genre is to undermine it: “Siento que hay algo que corre y que no tiene peso. Es algo que sube y no llega a descubrirse y tiene que esconderse en otra esquina. Y ese algo hace que se levanten las mismas preguntas.” The text conveys “something” that does not have weight or contours, like objects that are no longer themselves, through a discourse that is itself evasive and ambiguous: “Entonces ya no se reconocen los objetos como si ya no fueran más objetos.” Writing is thus an act of plastic representation, within a picture (“cuadro”) or frame (“marco”), where objects come in and out through the unpredictable agency of the “wind.” The “something” that results from its shifting course has to stay in hiding in order to be itself--it is a language that has to become void of its conventional linearity in order attain meaningfulness: “Sí, todo tiene su lugar y todo pesa cuando los objetos se vacían en la puerta.” When language is dismantled of its rhetorical normality, it begins to have some effectiveness. Thus despite their displacement, objects still return to “their place”: “Y de repente el viento vuelve a concentrarse en un punto y sobre ese punto vuelan los silencios y vuelven los objetos a meterse en el cuadro.” Time (“reloj”), space (“espejo”), and representation (“espejo”) do not claim preeminence. This is a genre where forms do not mirror anything concretely; where discourse transcends itself: “Mi mano conoce la caída.” The hand follows the falling motion of discourse, its constant evasion from purpose and univocality.

Braschi’s poetry is thus charged with the movements of changing identities: the day “se enojó conmigo” and “me dijo que cuando el viento volvió

por mi casa la escalera dejó de tener escalones . . . Pero el viento se disfrazó de hombre y me dijo que no sabía que ésa era mi casa” (21). The wind also mutates into something else. Time, space, and identity are incessantly questioned and redefined: “Todo es amarillo porque todo es rojo porque es un relámpago y un cachorrito y porque tiene un cielo, una cigüeña y un pingüino” (97). Braschi’s writing constitutes a plunge into an increasingly complex vortex of allusions, voices, subjects that are self-consciously present in her language; shoes “dicen que sí” (23), and a shirt has “deseos de respirar” (20). Every word parodies itself, as well as the references employed to create the poema en prosa: “La poesía es esa loca que grita. Todo parece poesía. Los locos miran alto. Todo parece locura. Los locos no temen, no temen el fuego. Las quemaduras del cuerpo son poesía. Descubrimiento del fuego en la estrella, descubrimiento del agua con la arena, no es poesía ni es prosa. Recuerda, pero no lo escribas” (53). The speaker does not want to identify any reference in her language; she wants to merge the extremes of poetry and prose and to preserve its product outside of their boundaries: “Recuerda, pero no lo escribas.” Writing is actualized beyond itself--in memory. She embraces the contradiction of the poema en prosa and takes its fragmentation to the limit: “El circo tenía un elefante blanco y una tortuga roja. Todos mis enemigos son borrachos y son también amigos de mi cuerpo. Ellos sólo le abren las puertas a mis ojos, y sorben, sorben, diez kilos de amor, y tragan, tragan, catorce kilos de quimeras” (58). The Chimera is that which can be anything; it is no longer simply the trap of prose, as in Casal’s “Japonería,” since Braschi’s text uses it as another prop in her repertory of signs, images, and voices. It is reinvented by Braschi, the master magician: “Yo soy el mago. Aquí está el truco. Lo ven de lejos porque no se ve de cerca” (60). The Chimera can thus be measured in

kilograms and come out of the body. It is the fusion of contradictions: “No es esto, ni es lo otro. Y no lo puedo definir” (105).

This multiplicity is exacerbated by a diffuse poetic voice that eludes its concreteness, acknowledging that “yo estaba toda hecha de letras” (16). Letters, however, are empty: “Esas letras no son signo de otro signo” (16). They cannot fulfill their purpose because they no longer fit the worn-out system of rhetoric: “Y me digo, cada letra es un recuerdo viejo y un silencio” (16). Braschi still hears the resonances of letters, but she uses them to alienate herself even more from language, which is paradoxically without a history: “Allí no se cuentan historias ni hay historia” (17). It is used deliberately as an artifact:

. . . Abre los brazos, si ves que te corrijo un verbo, ponme un acento y mándame callar. No quiero interrumpir tus horas de silencio. Pero llámame por teléfono o mándame un telegrama. Le tengo que pedir permiso a los acentos. Alguno me quitó el acento, puso una coma y se fue. Me quedé sola. Avísale a tu palabra que no podré habitarla hoy. Será mañana. Escucha. Hay que obedecer el sentido de la frase. “¿Y qué es hablar?” . . .

(19)

The speaker is still subject to the arbitrariness of language--to the “will of accents”--but she manipulates it to create fragmented relations within the text. Their incoherence nevertheless achieves some meaningfulness, not at the level of plot but of words themselves: “Avísale a tu palabra que no podré habitarla hoy.” She deliberately avoids “inhabiting” a discourse charged with connotations, attempting to create their own expression. This originality is enabled by the dialogic struggle for dominance of words and voices: there is a

deliberate exchange among spelling signs (accents, commas) through which the poet explores other modes of giving voice to an indefinite number of identities and subjectivities that cannot otherwise be represented. Almost every sentence belongs to a different voice. Words no longer connect to their preconceived meaning; they are detached from themselves, and reading is therefore an experience of alienation and misunderstanding. “Obedecer el sentido de la frase” is ironically to embrace the preconceived order of language--the use of subject, verb, and complement--while subverting its reliability as a stable and meaningful means of expression: “Y qué es hablar?”

A disjointed and illogical use of words multiplies the allusions of Braschi’s expression: “Aunque calle puede que hables lo que pienso cuando te callabas . . .” (23). These abrupt disruptions of coherence are self-conscious dialogizations that preserve none of the linearity of prose, while remaining within its apparent reliability: “Hola. Como regresaste tarde olvidé que te había escrito una línea, y recordé que la línea del libro había recogido un papel que me mandaste para que le escribiera al libro un recuerdo. Otra vez te has olvidado de las comas. No, no me olvidé. Ellas olvidaron ponerle un punto final a la memoria . . .” (14). Prose has achieved an explicit degree of openness; there are innumerable voices in the text, including those of “commas” and “books.” Language is not a medium but the end itself of writing; it controls the speaker: “Me dices que diga las cosas como son y yo digo como fueron y tú dices que las transformé y yo digo que no las transformo porque son así. Depende de cómo se levanten . . . Es el mandato de las cosas . . .” (25). Instead of the poetic voice, “things” control discourse dialogically.

Braschi’s writing is thus constructed as a stage of multipurpose props that enable the continuous transformation of characters and objects that do not

actually represent anything, but that are linked by their intrinsic dialogism: “Mi agua no sabría repetir lo que dijo el fuego. La mano entonces abarcaría un diálogo, la tuya me revierte la pregunta y el monólogo oculta su palabra. Y, sin embargo, mi silencio formula la pregunta y el hombre no responde. Un signo me interroga y la palabra se abre. No hay orilla” (38). There is no limit to language’s multivoicedness; words are the cover-up of something that is, in turn, the cover-up of something else: “El mundo es una bola de billar. Es el huevo y es la yema y es el reinado de un peón y es la corte del rey” (98). There is an endless displacement of identity through a language that ultimately claims nothing.

Although the poemas en prosa of El imperio de los sueños are about “nothing,” they can always represent “something” arbitrary in the inexhaustible play of identities of the text:

Conozco una noche que se acercaba siempre y de tanto acercarse abrió mis puertas. Al entrar vi que traía recuerdos en la parte más honda. Quieta en el umbral sonó el ruido de otra noche lejana. Ésa pudo deslizarse porque había calor y la puerta estaba abierta. Hasta el viento se colaba entre las piernas de esa noche cercana . . . (33)

Subjects here could be interpreted as substitutions for something else in a progression that leads nowhere. As the “narrative” begins to piece together its threads, the evident lack of “plot” drastically dismantles any sense of purpose implicit in prose. The contradictions within Braschi’s language create an unsettling effectiveness outside of the laws of logic and rhetoric: “Hasta el viento se colaba entre las piernas de esa noche cercana.” Despite her expression’s lack of referentiality (the night does not have legs), the genre

enables her to maintain the pace of narrative within the allusiveness of poetry, generating a paradoxical sense of comprehension in the reader. Even more than the fictional creation of plausible realities, the poema en prosa, as employed by Braschi, creates implausible worlds through a language that undermines its fictional capacity: “Una letra llega y me visita. Sienta sus piernas en la sala. Transita sin hablar. De pronto estalla y aparece otra figura . . .” (15). There is understanding despite a self-consciously incoherent language. Braschi’s poemas en prosa are about empty “objects” that continuously transform themselves into something else under the guise of a linear narrative. Thus each text is an independent entity whose “plot” is continuously reinvented, and where coherence is forfeited in favor of an ambiguous unity and compactness: “No hay regreso sin fondo. La letra nace de la vida. Allí comenzó su límite. Debajo descubro el mundo . . .” (15). Multivoicedness, contradiction, fragmentation, and displacement can nevertheless bring a reconstitution of language “under” the “letter.” Braschi’s recognition of the boundaries of the “letter,” or the stage of writing, is also a recognition of the power of its mutability: “Y cae el telón sobre este drama” (55). This is a “drama” about the conflict within Spanish American discourse to define itself. Embodying contradiction and arbitrariness, the poema en prosa generates a renewed self-analysis, a continuous revision of the possibilities of expression.

The poema en prosa embodies a discourse that retreats from its own negation, which is built into its paradoxical narrativity. The Spanish American poet is able to employ a rhetorical discourse--prose--that loses its authority through the subversive gesture of the genre, but that can nevertheless begin to actualize the unchanneled dialogic tension of languages, traditions, and

individual voices within society. These tensions enable the poema en prosa to attain a degree of aesthetic and ideologic freedom, because it is the site where the struggle for identity is constantly reconfiguring itself. Forms are not definite, and language has no preconceived authority. As Braschi claims in her poema en prosa: “Yo quiero que todo esté en mi libro. Que no se quede nada sin decir. Yo quiero mencionarlo todo. Vivirlo todo. Mirarlo todo. Hacerlo todo de nuevo. El final debe ser el principio. La salida del túnel. La entrada en la carretera de la vida. El correr en motocicleta” (79). The authenticity of this genre is generated by an intrinsic dialogism that cannot be confined within fixed boundaries. Can there be discursive identity in the continuous questioning of this genre that is both poetic and literal, high and low, ideal and profane, established and subversive? By writing a poema en prosa, the Spanish American poet affirms the complementary forces of tradition and genre, in a discourse that is paradoxically its product and its subversion.

The poema en prosa fulfills the “*désir d’émancipation*” which, according to Suzanne Bernard, is the motivation of writing (19), as well as “*le désir d’un langage inédit, inouï, que renouvelle les possibilités du langage*” (12). Its structured “non-form” recreates itself continuously, satisfying the need to innovate of Spanish American writers who must subvert language in order to legitimize it. It is a deliberate genre--a “*création volontaire et consciente*”--that arises out of the erasure of all genres, and presupposes its own limits (12). The poema en prosa does not “evolve,” because it is intrinsically individualistic and unique, but it does evolve in the sense that it influences its surrounding world. It has political relevance as a “*forme extrême de l’anarchie libératrice dans cette époque d’oppression et de cataclysme qui est le nôtre*” (16).

The Spanish American poema en prosa, then, is an intermediate genre

that is simultaneously itself and another, and can be seen as the contradictory product of rhetorical and psychological colonization. It is not surprising that Spanish American expression flourishes in a self-negating genre that signifies only to be questioned by its intrinsic ambiguity. In the poemas en prosa examined, the recurrent reference to deceptively empty structures--Casal's vase, capable of "representing" the impossible Chimera; Darío's oppressive and unfulfilling "villa"; Prado's multifaceted "pebble"; Ibarbourou's house of contradictions; and Ramos Sucre's apparently useless "house"--are spaces that are simultaneously legitimate and illegitimate, poetic and prosaic, ideal and subversive. Discourse profits from the continuous self-recreation of the poema en prosa, which cannot be formally defined, even when asserted as a genre, since the more its essential qualities are specified, the more elusive it becomes. A perpetual illegitimacy guarantees its inexhaustible expression and the ensuing difficulty of theorizing about it.

The gesture of writing a "poema" in "prosa" is that of voices that do not want to speak within fixed genres but whose discourse stages the traditional constraints that put those categories in place. The Spanish American poema en prosa is both the result and the subversion of its influences, as a genre in which social and aesthetic consciousness is manifested, configured, and fragmented. The anti-discursiveness of the poema en prosa suffuses it with historical relevance. It is also a genre where poets can claim a large measure of originality and independence from traditional discourses. Through this problematic genre, Spanish American discourse traces its own contingent but radically self-affirming capacity to acknowledge, while disrupting, the boundaries of forms conditioned by centuries of geographical, ideological, and aesthetic impositions.

Notes

I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Mary Ann Gosser Esquilín, for pointing out to me the anagram, "Pro(bl)em," which appears in the title of this thesis, and for helping me give shape to my argument through her insights on the recurrent image of the "wound" in the texts analyzed.

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¹ Mrs. Inchbald, Lover's Vows: A Play in Five Acts (London: Robinson, 1798) 538.

² Apart from a book by Jesse Fernández, El poema en prosa en Hispanoamérica: del modernismo a la vanguardia [Estudio crítico y antología] (1994), which carefully traces the Spanish American practitioners of the poema en prosa in the last century, no other titles have been published in the U.S. on this subject. Fernández claims that the poema en prosa is the genre that is "menos comprendido de todos los que el modernismo introdujo hace aproximadamente un siglo" (40). However, two dissertations have recently been written on this topic, "El poema en prosa en Hispanoamérica," by Carmen Ivette Pérez Marín (Harvard, 1991), and "Theoretical and Historical Foundations of the Spanish-American Prose Poem," by Nicholas J. Mason-

⁸See Suzanne Bernard, Tzvetan Todorov, and Mary Ann Caws and Hermine Riffaterre.

⁹Michel Beaujour thus distrusts claims about the formal autonomy of the poema en prosa beyond that of its brevity:

All attempts to define the prose poem in terms of lexical, syntactical, or rhetorical (stylistic) deviance from “ordinary prose” are demonstrably ideological, or logically flawed, or both. Ideological, in so far as they presuppose that “poetry” is somehow separable from verbal artifacts, or inconsequential, when they suggest that the prose of the prose poem is not really prose by virtue of its rhythms, figures, syntax, etc. (49)

According to Beaujour, what makes the prose poem different is a conscious faith in this genre, as well as in the transrhetorical nature of poetic imagery, which is “metasemiotic,” “real,” “arbitrary,” and “secretely motivated” (51). The lyricism of the prose poem lies not in its musicality or rhythms, but in a transcendental, non-formal poeticalness.

¹⁰ The origin of the preeminence given to poetry, as opposed to rhetoric, can be traced back to Aristotle’s Poetics, where the philosopher clearly set epic apart from rhetoric, providing the first “‘art’ of poetry” ever written (Hutton 6). Tragedy was for Aristotle the highest form of poetry. It was “artistic prose,” however, that the Sophist Gorgias of Leontini had identified, before Aristotle, as the most significant form: “Gorgias celebrates the sovereign power of Discourse, the Logos or Word, whether in prose or verse, as magical in its effects and penetrating the soul for good or ill as a drug or medicine penetrates the body” (Hutton 8). “Logos” is then a fundamental principle that transcends form, akin to Schlegel’s concept of Universalpoesie. Gorgias’ theory is based

on the notion of language's inherent rhetoricity, whether it be poetry or specifically rhetoric. The Sophists reacted to the previous Greek philosophers who aimed at arriving at truth and at an all-encompassing cosmology, and emphasized instead the relativizing position of the subject (Copleston 81). As a Sophist who taught the art of persuasion, Gorgias considers "deception" one of the aims of "logos" (Hutton 8). His skepticist and relativistic notion of language strengthens his vision of a "logos" or "word" that constitutes the original discourse and is prior to particular forms. This anticipates the Romantic overturn of genres.

¹¹ Notable exceptions are the few writers who translated directly the German Romantics, such as the Peruvian Manuel González Prada (1848-1918), who translated Goethe, Schiller, and Körner (Bellini 250); and the Venezuelan Juan Antonio Pérez Bonalde (1846-1892), whose translations of Poe and Heine are renowned (Carilla 1: 140).

¹² It is ironic that, at a time when Spanish American literature was emerging from the so-called romanticismo of such naturalist and realist writers as Esteban Echeverría, creator of El matadero (1838), and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, author of the popular regionalist novel, Facundo o civilización y barbarie (1845), Martí wanted it to reclaim its true Romantic origins. Thus Martí's assertion that "Ya lo de Bécquer pasó como se deja de lado a un retrato cuando se conoce al original precioso; y lo de Núñez de Arce va a pasar, porque la fe nueva alborea, y no ha de regir la duda trasnochada, porque traiga, por único mérito, el manto con menos relumbrones que el del romanticismo" (qtd. in Carilla 2: 187-88). This quote attests to Martí's firm belief in a new literature that surpassed the superficiality of Spanish claims to Romanticism, in an effort to recover the "original" German ideas. Other

Spanish American works popularly associated with romanticismo are Jorge Isaacs's María (1867), José Hernández's Martín Fierro (1870-1880), and Juan Zorrilla de San Martín's Tabaré (1888).

¹³ Similarly, for Paz, the French vanguard, as represented by Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and later Paul Claudel, Max Jacob, Francis Ponge, and others, share a common thread linking them back to Romanticism: "La vanguardia europea, especialmente la de los países latinos--futuristas italianos, ultraístas españoles e hispanoamericanos, y todo el rico y variado movimiento francés-- . . . son rupturas de la tradición central de Occidente, y están directamente afiliados al romanticismo" ("Cuatro" 29-30). These artistic currents also searched for alternative modes of expression.

¹⁴ Influenced by Dante and Cervantes, Schlegel conceived of a form that embodied the subversiveness of comedy, as well as the linearity of thought, through a singular mechanism: wit and irony, which were, respectively, the synthesizing or creative and the skeptical or destructive principles. Cervantes's masterpieces, multiform parodies of literary conventions and genre, became the source of modern Poesie, the quintessentially Romantic principle that defied the categories constructed around it:

Jene ganz romantische, reich und kunstvoll verschlungene
Komposition, wo jede Art von Stil auf die mannigfaltigste Weise
wechselt, aus diesen verschiedenen Stilen oft neue Mischungen
sich entwickeln, oft das Parodistische sich findet, wenn alte
Romane parodiert werden,--findet sich in der höchsten
Vollkommenheit in den drei größten Kunstwerken des Cervantes:
der GALATEA, dem DON QUIJOTE, dem PERSILES. Der Stil ist
in allen diesen Werken durchaus romantisch. (Schlegel 107)

These works, which are central in the European, particularly Spanish, canon, and which are deeply ingrained in Spanish American consciousness, represented, for Schlegel, the highest manifestation of the transgressive formlessness of Poesie, which subverts its very means of expression. There is, in Don Quijote, no trust in rhetoric and structure, no unity of form but rather a mixture of rhetoric, structures, and forms, thus questioning the legitimacy of many discourses. This novel parodies itself through a form that defies closure. Furthermore, Schlegel claims that wit achieves its highest level in Spanish and Italian literature as a way to compensate for these unpoetic languages: “Den Italienern und Spaniern blieb kein anderes Mittel übrig, ihre abstrakte und unpoetische Sprache zur Poesie zu bilden, als das Medium des Witzes” (106). Irony is the means to lyricism in discourse. Schlegel thus borrowed from the most influential author of Spanish literature to help construct the foundation of his Romantic theory of genre.

¹⁵ Schlegel considered the aphorism to be the most appropriate form of philosophical expression, and he emphasized the theoretical capacity of the “fragment.” According to his universalist theory, in which the poet creates symbols out of his attunement with the universe, artistic expression is necessarily fragmentary because human intuition is incomplete. Thus the richness and mutability of poetic symbolism arises from irony, which is “a feeling of the irreconcilable conflict between the absolute and the relative, the consciousness of the impossibility of and necessity for complete communication” (Behler and Struc 36). Irony is the principle underlying the Romantic distrust of closed forms and structures; expression can only be tentative and incomplete, never fully achieved.

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