Such Stuff as Latin Dreams Are Made On: ARIEL by Jose Enrique Rodo; translated by Margaret Sayers Peden, foreword by James W. Symington, prologue by Carlos Fuentes (University of Texas Press: $16.95, cloth; $7.95, paper; 149 pp.)

May 29, 1988 | Raymond Parades | Parades, a professor of English at UCLA, writes often on North and South American literatures

In 1900, a young Uruguayan teacher and literary critic aroused readers from Mexico to Argentina with a small book proposing a plan of cultural development for Latin America. Jose Enrique Rodo called for a culture that would preserve traditional European standards of morality and beauty while rejecting North American values. "Ariel" was hardly a work of great originality; its sources of its enormous influence lay instead in its passion, its calculated elegance, its erudition and, perhaps most important, its timelessness.

When Rodo published "Ariel," Latin America was still suffering the aftershocks of the Spanish-American War of 1898. Intellectuals were deeply and often bitterly divided. One faction viewed the war's outcome with alarm and despair, the spectacle of the United States possessing Puerto Rico and occupying Cuba regarded as one more experience of humiliation and loss of sovereignty for the region. But another group saw the easy victory of the United States over a former world power as indisputable evidence of political, economic and even cultural superiority and so rushed to imitate North American institutions. In either case, Latin Americans were ready for the infusion of pride, optimism and vision Rodo provided.

Very quickly, "Ariel" became the subject of tireless discussion not only in print but in the numerous literary societies that sprang up expressly to weigh its merits. For exhorting his brethren to forge a distinctive cultural identity, Rodo was proclaimed, in a delicious piece of irony, "the Latin Emerson." Meanwhile, "Ariel" went on to attract generations after generation of readers. With the present English translation, it has now reached its 16th edition.

The title of Rodo's essay comes from Shakespeare's, "The Tempest," which features not only the "sissy spirit" Ariel but two other characters who captured Rodo's imagination, Prospero and Caliban. Rodo regarded all three as cultural archetypes, much as the French scholar Ernest Renan had in 1878 when he brought out "Caliban," a drama philosophique, which decried the decline of aristocratic French culture. An admirer of Renan, Rodo essentially elaborated the Frenchman's formulations of Shakespeare's characters and gave them varying degrees of emphasis. Primary, of course, was Ariel, a representation of "the noble, soaring aspect of the human spirit ... the superiority of reason and feeling over the base impulses of irrationality." The "base impulses" were embodied in Caliban, a symbol, as Rodo put it, of "brutal sensuality." Finally, there was the noble Prospero: a lover of books, a possessor of magical powers and the master of Ariel. In Rodo's mind, these figures represented the major cultural forces in motion across Latin America.

"Ariel" consists of six sections presented in the form of an extended address by a teacher to his students at the end of the school year. The opening of the essay is heavy with symbolism. The book-lined classroom in which the "venerable, old" teacher meets his students conveys a distinctly classical quality, as if Socrates himself might feel comfortable there. Dominating the room is a bronze statue of Ariel, wings unfurled and poised for flight. The teacher, dubbed "Prospero" by his students for his fine character and devotion to knowledge, assumes his customary place beside the statue. Once seated, Prospero calls upon Ariel for divine inspiration and begins.

For Rodo, the most fundamental of classical values was "the sense of the beautiful," which he regarded as the indispensable prerequisite of the ability to distinguish good from evil. Rodo went so far as to insist that an exact correspondence existed between good taste and morality in both individuals and societies; as he did throughout "Ariel," Rodo cited an impressive array of European thinkers and artists to support his contention.

Rodo made his plea for Latin American idealism and spiritualism so fervently because he considered them to be under sustained attack, primarily from the forces of utilitarianism, materialism and democracy. Rodo believed the first of these to be one of the great sources of corruption in the modern world, encouraging behavior in which "every action is determined by the immediate ends of self-interest." Materialism led to standards of well-being that ignored morality; furthermore, it turned everything, even human life, into a commodity. Democracy was dangerous because it naturally destroyed excellence and encouraged mediocrity.

Unlike Ernest Renan, however, Rodo believed that democracy could be reformed to allow "human superiorities" to develop through a Darwinian process of natural selection. As Rodo looked about, he could hardly help but notice that his three evils were flourishing most vigorously in the United States. Consequently, he entreated his readers to resist influences from the North. It is important to emphasize that Rodo's attitude toward the United States was disapproving but not hostile; as he himself wrote about the northamericans: "Although I do not love them, I admire them."

A decade or so after its publication, "Ariel" began to decline in influence. Its florid modernist style fell out of favor, and the rise of indigenous art and values created a cultural climate in which Rodo's worship of European culture was not widely admired. In time, the once-sensational "Ariel" became just a literary curiosity. The death blow to Rodo's status as a cultural visionary came in 1931, when the Cuban critic, Roberto Fernandez Retamar, published his own "Caliban," an essay that brilliantly argued that Rodo's symbol of "brutal sensuality" was in fact heroic, an exemplar of Third World endurance and resistance.

Despite its decline, "Ariel" remains a valuable book for American readers, representing a major episode in the evolution of Latin American consciousness. The present translation by Margaret Sayers Peden captures many of Rodo's stylistic excesses; the volume also contains useful annotations and bibliographical sections and a provocative prologue by Carlos Fuentes.
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