

## COPING WITH CALIBAN

By JEAN FRANCO; Jean Franco teaches Latin American literature at Columbia University  
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**ARIEL** By Jose Enrique Rodo. Translated by Margaret Sayers Peden. Prologue by Carlos Fuentes. 156 pp. Austin: University of Texas Press. Cloth, \$16.95. Paper, \$7.95.

Jose Enrique Rodo's "Ariel" was first published in Uruguay in 1900. Like Matthew Arnold's "Culture and Anarchy," it confronts the question of how high culture is to survive in a modern mass society. The regularity with which such essays appeared in the 19th century was symptomatic of the emergent power of the masses in culture and politics.

Rodo's essay is, in part, a response to the critic Ernst Renan's play "Caliban," with its gloomy view of democratic society. In Renan's dramatic sequel to Shakespeare's "Tempest," Ariel represents the spiritual values that fly out the window when the barbarous Caliban acquires political power, leaving Prospero, who represents the intellectual, faced with a choice between losing power or allying himself with the masses. In his version of this allegory, Rodo is more constructive and more Utopian, for he attempts to reconcile modern democracy, equal opportunity and social evolution with the harmonious development of the individual.

Rodo's essay is framed as a kind of commencement address delivered by the teacher, Prospero, to his male disciples. What concerns Prospero is how to shore up high culture, which was rapidly being undermined by the egoism, bad taste and utilitarianism Rodo found in the democratic society of the United States. Thus Prospero urges his young students to dedicate themselves to the city of the future, to cultivating all that is devoted to "the dissemination and defense of selfless spiritual idealism - art, science, morality, religious sincerity, a politics of ideas."

Contemporary readers are likely to resist Rodo's equation of good taste and moral virtue and question his confidence in the disinterestedness of the meritocracy. It's no surprise, then, that in his brilliant and incisive prologue, the Mexican writer and former diplomat Carlos Fuentes finds "Ariel" irritating - even while acknowledging that it is "an essential book in the protracted Latin American search for identity." Rodo (1872-1917), a Uruguayan philosopher and literary critic, wrote "Ariel," his best-known work, soon after the Spanish-American War, when a brash and aggressive United States was poised to assume continental hegemony and when the threat of Americanization throughout the Western Hemisphere was already obvious. Unlike Cuba's Jose Marti and Argentina's Domingo Sarmiento, Rodo never visited the United States; instead, his observations on the rising tide of American vulgarity and mediocrity came from books and from such travel writing as Paul Bourget's novel "Outre Mer." What most alarmed him was the North Americans' aspiration to stamp their vision of civilization on the rest of the globe, for he did not find their contribution to humanity so great "as to cause the axis of the world to shift in the direction of a new Capitol."

The alternative that Rodo proposed for Latin America - a democratic society that freely recognized the aristocracy of the best - was breathtakingly unrealistic. Yet it struck a responsive chord in generations of Latin American intellectuals precisely because of its insistence on the integrity of their culture. Over the years, its influence has been considerable; among the more recent glosses on Rodo's work, for example, are the Cuban Roberto Fernandez Retamar's "Caliban" and the American Richard M. Morse's "El Espejo de Prospero" ("Prospero's Mirror").

"Ariel," like Arnold's "Culture and Anarchy" and Emerson's "American Scholar," is a key text in the longstanding debate concerning culture and democratization. Mr. Fuentes describes its style as "a bizarre kind of musicality . . . as though of Greek goddesses dancing to Elgar's Pomp and Circumstance." In this new English version, thanks to a fine yet creative translation by Margaret Sayers Peden (who also provides an excellent annotated bibliography) this anachronism no longer stands in the way of our reading. "Ariel" is revitalized.

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