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Such Stuff as Latin Dreams Are Made On : ARIEL by Jose Enrique Rodó; 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 | Raymund Paredes | *Paredes, 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 Rodó 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; the sources of its enormous influence lay instead in its passion, its calculated elegance, its erudition and, perhaps most important, its timeliness.

When Rodó 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 Rodó provided.

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

The title of Rodó's essay comes from Shakespeare's, "The Tempest," which features not only the "airy spirit" Ariel but two other characters who captured Rodó's imagination, Prospero and Caliban. Rodó regarded all three as cultural archetypes, much as the French scholar Ernest Renan had in 1878 when he brought out "Caliban," a *drame philosophique*, which depicted the decline of aristocratic French culture. An admirer of Renan, Rodó 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 Rodó 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 Rodó'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 unfolded 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 Rodó, the most fundamental of classical values was "the sense of the beautiful," which he regarded as the indispensable precursor of the ability to distinguish good from evil. Rodó 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," Rodó cited an impressive array of European thinkers and artists to support his contention.

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

A decade or so after its publication, "Ariel" began to decline in influence. Its florid *modernista* style fell out of favor, and the rise of indigenous art and values created a cultural climate in which Rodó's worship of European culture was not widely admired. In time, the once-sensational "Ariel" became just a literary curiosity. The death blow to Rodó's status as a cultural visionary came in 1971, when the Cuban critic, Roberto Fernandez Retamar, published his own "Caliban," an essay that brilliantly argued that Rodó'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 softens many of Rodó's stylistic excesses; the volume also contains useful annotations and bibliographical sections and a provocative prologue by Carlos Fuentes.

