Culture, Geopolitics and Nihilism in *Eco: Revista de la Cultura de Occidente*

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> Esta revista aspira a constituir un eco de las más notables y verdaderas voces de Occidente, en particular del ámbito alemán. Mas su propósito no es la producción de un mero reflejo intelectual, sino estimular, en la medida de sus fuerzas, la aventura espiritual del hombre de Occidente y, de modo más concreto, del hombre hispano-americano. Esas voces y ese *eco* son nuestro programa de acción. Sólo el espíritu defiende al espíritu.
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> —"Propósito," *Eco* I:1 (1960), p.2.

> ¿Pero la América Latina, qué es? ¿Acaso se trata de nada más que de una noción geográfica, buena para delimitar la masa de tierra que del Río Grande se extiende hasta el Cabo de Hornos? ¿O de una comunidad puramente lingüística, formada por las veintiuna naciones americanas que hablan lenguas derivadas del latín?
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> ¿O si representa el término *algo más* y cosa distinta de esas dos definiciones un tanto elementales, como tácitamente se supone o expresamente se estatuye hoy día, dondequiera que de Latinoamérica se hable o se escriba en otras latitudes?
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> Compartimos esta última opinión, aunque no sabríamos decir a ciencia cierta en qué consiste ese "algo más," esa "otra cosa" por la cual acaso se distinga la América del Sur fundamentalmente de la del Norte, o del Viejo Mundo, de Asia, de Oceanía, etc., y la incertidumbre se nos hace característica del fenómeno mismo que contemplamos.
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> —"A dónde vamos," *Eco* XXII (1971), pp.5-6

This paper is part of a work in progress which examines Latin American literary aesthetics in relation to so-called "European nihilism." Nietzsche spoke of nihilism in the dual context of the decline of the highest values and the positing of new values. For my part, I am interested in how literary works and theories of literature engage with questions of value and meaning—for instance, either by incorporating the logic of valuation as their own grounding principle, or by reflecting on what is forgotten or obscured in the determination of value. In the first half of this paper, my comments will be focused on a cultural journal published in Bogotá, Colombia between 1960-1984, titled *Eco: Revista de la Cultura de Occidente*. I will say a few words about the history of the journal and its cultural politics, which take shape as a response to the widespread reconfiguration of social, political and economic relations in the West following WWII. The journal promotes what it calls "Western culture" as an alternative to the increasing

dominance of techno-scientific thinking and commercialism. I will argue, however, that this juxtaposition of culture against techno-scientific or techno-economic forces is in fact an anachronism whose proper object—"culture," or as Matthew Arnold put it, "the best which has been thought and said in the world"—no longer embodies the meaning and stability imputed to it for much of modernity. I am interested in exploring this anachronism, and I believe the "untimeliness" of its venture has important theoretical and political implications today. In the second half of the paper, I will elaborate on the problem that *Eco* confronts by framing it as a matter of nihilism. I will say a few words about Nietzsche's influential notion of European nihilism, and will then turn to an important debate between Ernst Jünger and Martin Heidegger concerning the nature of nihilism and the possibility of thinking its limits. Finally, I will link this discussion of nihilism back to the cultural politics of *Eco*. The paper I am going to read today is a modified version of an article forthcoming in *The New Centennial Review*. As far as I am aware, the only previously published scholarly account of *Eco* is an essay by Eduardo Jaramillo which appeared in *Boletín Cultural y Bibliográfico* in 1989. I would like to express my debt and gratitude to the author.

The journal was sponsored by the *Instituto Cultural Colombo-Alemán* in Bogotá, and its editorial staff—which included Hernando Valencia Goekel and Ernesto Volkening—included a number of European expatriates living in Colombia. The editorial statements published during the early 1960's reveal two separate aims. On one hand, in the first volume the editors announce a project of translation and dissemination of the "great works" of the Germanic tradition for a Spanish-speaking readership in Colombia and Latin America ["Propósito," May 1960]. This project of cultural sharing establishes a specific context in which the editors would like the tropological "echo" in the journal's title to be understood: as a form of transculturation, but not

in the typical sense and not for the usual reasons. The aims do not involve employing cultural production in order to promote assimilation or modernization. Instead, the aim would seem to be the revitalization of spirit—the spirit of the tradition itself—in order better to combat certain planetary forces which have contributed to its decline. At the same time, paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, we could say that the idea of translation operative here is in fact a creative principle of transformation, promising to open up to *Eco*'s readers possibilities that were only latent in the "original" texts.

On the other hand, beginning in the mid-1960's—at the same moment that Latin American writers such as Vargas Llosa were receiving literary recognition from European publishing houses such as Seix Barral—the journal began to publish the literary and theoretical works of contemporary Latin American writers, while also showing new interest in the regional specificity of Latin America. If José Donoso is correct in asserting that the Boom novel had to travel to Spain in order to establish its place among the "great works" of the Western tradition, then the transformation seen in the contents of *Eco* between 1960 and 1964 gives evidence of the rapid speed with which this signal travels from Latin America and Spain and then back again.

Despite some obvious differences, the Germanist and Latin Americanist aims are also very much alike in at least one respect: both depend on a concept of "culture" that has its roots in the early 19th century. As David Lloyd and Paul Thomas have shown, this concept of culture has always already been subsumed under the State, for which culture serves as a supplement (Lloyd and Thomas 1997). In the context of nation-building, the idea of culture—and of literature in particular—was seen as an ideal pedagogical tool for shaping subjects who identify with a nation and who desire political representation by the State. In the Romantic tradition, culture has been viewed as indispensable for the formation of "well-rounded," "whole" subjects, and thus it

provides a counterweight to the historical process of modernization, which calls for the formation of specialists and tends to fragment social relations. This ideological fusing of the concept of culture to the political reality of the modern State holds sway not only in the foundational discourses of Schiller and Wordsworth in Europe and Echeverría and Sarmiento in Latin America, it also informs a number of late 19th and 20th century projects whose goals are less clearly associated with the state, and which could more precisely described as reformist, revolutionary or aestheticist (Martí's "Nuestra América" comes to mind, as do Angel Rama's concept of transculturation, Octavio Paz's theories of modern poetics, and various promoters of the Latin American Boom).

By the mid-20th century, however, the foundation of this cultural politics is called into question by the radical reconfiguration of economic and political relations around the globe following WWII. In view of this new array of economic, political and techno-scientific forces—all of which characteristically extend beyond the confines of national borders—the State no longer functions as the sovereign point of reference for political action or social organization. If we are today living the end of the epoch of state sovereignty, this doesn't mean that the state ceases to play an important role in local and international arenas. Furthermore, the exhaustion of state sovereignty is no doubt experienced differently according to one's location; its implications and consequences are not necessarily identical for Bogotá, Buenos Aires and Berlin. Regardless of location, however, I would argue that "culture" can no longer be said to fulfill the same purpose and represent the same value it embodied for much of the previous two centuries. This seismic shift also affects the internal coordinates of cultural production. While literature has enjoyed a privileged status as shaper of subjectivity and social space for much of the past two centuries, following WWII it finds itself increasingly obliged to compete with new forms of

cultural production which reflect the intensified pace of technological innovation, particularly in the field of tele-communications. These new cultural forms are be driven by a new rationale, which the editors of *Eco* ominously term "the American way of life." I will call the nihilism of the market, in which it is everyone for themselves and the other only concerns me insofar as s/he has something I wish to buy.

The threat of nihilism is alluded to in many of the editorial statements and translated texts of *Eco*. A number of these articles reflect nostalgically on the displacement of European intellectual communities during and after the war, and likewise express doubt about the ability of the Western tradition to continue functioning as a guiding historical force for advancing the values of progress, rationality, equality, and justice in the world. Of course, in the early 1960's the notion that the Western cultural tradition is threatened by an unmediated technological drive was nothing new. Such misgivings can be found throughout the long history of *Kulturkritik*, in various avant-garde movements, and in Latin American writers such as Borges and Carpentier. What *is* new for the historical moment of *Eco*, however, is that the self-evident necessity of cultural values—and thus also the freedom these values are said to represent—has been called into question by the rationale of the market and its tendential displacement of modernity's foundational principle of state sovereignty.

My comments on nihilism in the second half of this paper will take as their point of departure a post-war debate between two 20th century German thinkers, Ernst Jünger and Martin Heidegger. The primary points of reference will be Jünger's 1950 essay *γber die linie* and Heidegger's response, similarly titled as *γber "die linie"* (1955). The exchange has to do with the modern problem of nihilism, and with the questions of how to define and confront nihilism today. Does it make sense to speak of overcoming nihilism, as Jünger does? Or does the concept

of "overcoming" in fact presuppose too much, as Heidegger will suggest? This debate over the nature and limits of nihilism can shed light on the cultural politics of *Eco*, and is particularly helpful for thinking about how our understanding of culture and literature relates to this problem.

Before getting into the Jünger-Heidegger debate, let me say a few words about the term "nihilism." Nietzsche understood nihilism as the attitude that accompanies the devaluation of the highest values of any given era (Nietzsche 1967). Nihilism isn't the cause of the decline; it is merely what obtains once the decline has taken place and a void is left where once the highest values reigned. Nihilism announces a time when we no longer believe in the theology of a "true" world behind the world of appearances, and when we no longer see the things of this world as avatars of transcendence, as representatives of an ultimate meaning or goal ("the triumph of Reason," "Liberty and Equality," "the emancipation of the proletariat," and so on). In contrast to religion and secular humanism, nihilism is the resigned feeling that life leads to nothing—or, as Nietzsche says, "the 'why?' finds no answer." Values, then, are only the projections of a subject who wishes to know nothing about its true groundlessness. The human will—or what Nietzsche terms the will to power—thereby comes to be seen as the true source of all value and meaning.

In the five decades that have passed since the Jünger-Heidegger debate, the terms in which we think about our historical situation have changed considerably. Jünger, working in the conservative tradition of *Kulturkritik*, understood the cause of nihilism to lie in the increasingly dominant role of technology in modern society. Today, meanwhile, the threat of technology has been surpassed in the eyes of many by the triumph of the market, which now represents the supreme threat to the livability of our world. In either case, however, the stakes are essentially the same: whether it is the instrumental rationale of technology or the market's law of equivalence, we still have to do with a totalizing determination of our world. Indeed, these

representations are nihilistic *because* they are totalizing. These discourses equate being (by which I mean both the origin and the totality of our world) with the sum total of objects that are present and able to be consumed. Anything that cannot be grasped as an objectifiable and quantifiable presence, meanwhile, is defined in the same terms, albeit negatively—as non-being or nothingness—and is dismissed as unworthy of further consideration.

For Jünger, the spread of nihilism in the modern era is enabled by a powerful nexus of technology and capitalism, and finds its most salient expression in the tendential reduction of all spheres of life to the calculus of labor and production. Even those spheres that ostensibly have nothing to do with production (such as "free time") are compelled to define themselves in opposition to it ("free time" means "free from labor"), and thus they continue to be governed by the productionist rationale. "Labor" in Jünger's analysis is analogous to Nietzsche's "will to power." On one hand, it is the nature of both rationales to deny the existence of any higher authority. But when they expose transcendence as just empty talk, these rationales effectively create a situation in which their own internal law can pass itself off as all there is. The goal of production is the reproduction of the present conditions of production. And so the death of transcendence that defines the time of nihilism ends up reproducing a discourse of transcendence in the form of a human subject who produces or wills. (The paradox I have just described, in which the negation of transcendence is itself a form of transcendence, has a corollary which I'll discuss in a moment.)

As the title of his essay implies ("*Über die linie*"), Jünger views the historical moment in which he writes as a time of decision and traversal. The "line" is a metaphor for our time, seen as a turning point where the future of the world hangs precariously in the balance. In crossing this threshold, Jünger tells us, one of two outcomes will obtain: either we will have fully and fatally

immersed ourselves in the desert of nihilism, or else we will have succeeded in overcoming nihilism and will find ourselves in an entirely new epoch. Jünger's essay is in large part a prescription for how we can overcome this disease.

One of the objections that Heidegger raises to Jünger's analysis is that its pragmatic focus on overcoming preempts any sustained reflection on the true nature and extent of what it is dealing with. Like all voluntarisms, Jünger's discourse is doubly deceptive. To speak of overcoming implies both that one knows where one is going ahead of time and that there is solid ground to be found on the other side. Overcoming presupposes the existence of a place and time that would be definitively outside the history of nihilism, and likewise it posits an omniscient subject who could chart a course between the history of nihilism and the time of post-nihilism. Here we have the corollary to the paradox I mentioned moments ago: the projected overcoming of nihilism must have recourse to the will to power, and in this respect it is itself nihilistic.

In fact, however, such difficulties may well be inherent to any attempt to bridge the gap between theory and praxis today. Archimedes is reported to have said, "Give me a place to stand and I will move the world." But if Jünger is correct in his diagnosis, then it would seem that there *is* no place to stand today—no place for thinking that has not already been compromised by the spread of nihilism and its calculating rationales. Nietzsche's reference to "European nihilism" notwithstanding, the problem of nihilism is fundamentally a planetary phenomenon, or a problem that implicates our *world* as such. (I want to stress, by the way, that "world" is by no means synonymous with "planet" or "globe," and that "world" implies a set of coordinates for thinking and acting in a meaningful way. So to say that nihilism implicates our world is to say that it affects these coordinates themselves.) But if nihilism always threatens our world in its entirety, the nature of the threat is to deny us any access to an outside or a beyond from which

we could interpret and change our world. The threat to the planet is also the threat *of* the planetary, the danger of a totalizing discourse whose triumph would be synonymous with its having colonized or eliminated any alternative modality of thinking. Heidegger is well aware of this problem, and if his critique of Jünger is to avoid becoming a fatalistic acceptance of nihilism it must try to ascertain the possibility of thinking the limits of nihilism from the inside.

Heidegger's response gives Jünger's title a different inflection: instead of *crossing over* [*über*] the line, he proposes to speak *of* [*über*] the line itself. His essay thereby calls for an interrogation of the essence of nihilism, leaving open the possibility that what we call "nihilism" is in fact far more complex and heterogeneous than the existence of single term would suggest. While I don't have time to cover Heidegger's response in its entirety, the subtle hermeneutic difference between "over" and "of" can help to illustrate the direction his response takes: Jünger, in his haste to arrive at a diagnosis and prescribe a cure for what is going badly in the world today, overlooks two important considerations. First, he neglects to consider that the teleological, medicalized language of curing and overcoming might itself belong to the history of nihilism from which it tries to free itself. Likewise, the attempt to oppose nihilism via a return to cultural values proves itself to be nihilistic in a reactive sense: the images of coherence and unity it finds in the past is in fact a nostalgic illusion that could only be projected from within the time of nihilism. In presupposing that cultural values are a necessary ground for life, the discourse of overcoming blinds itself to the historicity of valuation (which, as Marx has shown, is only conceivable once commodity production has become the normal state: see Marx 1977), and it thereby forecloses any possibility of breaking with this history. For Heidegger, on the other hand, the fissures that appear in the edifice of the Western tradition are in fact potential sites for thinking—and they are perhaps the only chance for creating a true break with the history of

valuation. (This is what I mean by thinking the limits of nihilism from within: like all language, the discourses of technology and valuation include gaps and excesses which can prove fruitful for thinking the limits of these discourses.)

Values thinking, or the view that values are the necessary ground for thinking or acting in the world, is just the reverse side of nihilism understood as the decline of the highest values. Both rationales assert their own criteria as encompassing the totality of what *is*, and dismiss everything else as illusory non-being. Values thinking and nihilism both belong to the same history—the history of Western metaphysics. And so it is difficult to see how "culture," if by that one means cultural values, could constitute a real alternative to nihilism. However, there remains the possibility of thinking culture otherwise, and of asking how reading, writing, and thinking might help to make visible the limits of valuation. By way of conclusion, I want to return to *Eco* in order to suggest that both of these possibilities can be found there.

I now refer you to the "Adónde vamos" passage from March-April 1971. The editorial statement alludes to the problem which Latin America has historically represented for Western knowledge. Regardless of whether this knowledge is produced in Latin America or imported from outside, the epistemological process of positing and grasping a Latin American identity or essence has always amounted to a kind of expropriation. This process takes what I will hesitantly term a singularity and transposes it into a conceptual framework to which it is by definition exogenous. The problem of expropriation cannot be resolved by methodological reform or by transferring the means of production from Europe to Latin America, as Martí's essay "Nuestra América" famously illustrates. A paradox governs the history of Latin America as an epistemological object: its difference can only be understood through misunderstanding, by conforming it to what is predictable. As soon as one tries to define the difference—as a different

perspective, a different temporality, a different way of life, and so on—one has already expropriated the difference and reduced it to a concept that has its origins in the Western metaphysical tradition. The name "Latin America" would seem to hold the place of something in excess of any concept. Or perhaps it is the excess *of* concept itself: not only the suspicion that no definition quite fits and that any definition would in fact represent an expropriation, but this very experience of excrescence and expropriation which informs the history of Latin America from its very beginnings.

How, then, can we make sense of the "algo más" in the editorial statement? Let us repeat the question: "¿Pero la América Latina, *qué es*?" To paraphrase Nietzsche, here the "what" finds no answer. Or, better still, the question presumes too much. It takes it for granted that the name "Latin America" corresponds to a stable identity or substance, one which could be systematically ordered in relation to other regions of the world. But what if "Latin America" in fact named something that couldn't be grasped in this way? What I have in mind is the matter of the name or naming, or the fact that "Latin America" is not a concrete entity but instead a construct of language—the effect of academic, cultural and political acts of naming. In this sense, the question "What is it?" would have to be modified in order to allow us to hear what rhetorical theory calls a performative use of language, or a use of language that would *create* rather than merely describe an event. The history of Latin America provides many concrete examples of such "performative" acts. What we today refer to as "Latin America" has, since at least the time of Simón Bolívar, been associated with, among other things, a certain promise: the promise of solidarity against imperialism and tyranny, the promise of social justice, the promise of revolution, and so on. Always the promise of a future that would differ radically from the prevailing order of things, and therefore—I would argue—the promise is also irreducible to *any*

form of presence, either actual or possible. The structure of the promise keeps things open against any calcification of history, against the emergence of any *sentido único*. There could be no epistemology of the promise, since the promise is by definition irreducible to what is thinkable as presence.

If the "Adónde vamos" editorial statement provides no answer to the question "¿*qué es*?," perhaps it is because any answer would already be a betrayal of the promise. But this silence also allows the question itself to linger and to reverberate as a troubling remainder for the metaphysics of presence. Akin to the mythological figure from whom it takes its name, the journal repeats and translates in order to sign its own name, and in order to hold the place of a singularity whose truth cannot be formulated as value or presence, since it is always still to come. "*Veni*," demands Narcissus; "Come, come," replies Echo.

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