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THE HERO AS FLÂNEUR: EDWARDS BELLO'S *CRIOLLOS EN PARIS*

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> Preferible para mi ecuanimidad
> habría sido que no conociera París,
> ¡pero lo conocí!
> Joaquín Edwards Bello (*NC* 110)

Writing at a time of great experimentation in literature, the Chilean Joaquín Edwards Bello set out in *Criollos en París* (1933) to write a traditional novel with a didactic purpose: to prove to his uprooted hero — and to others like him — that he must leave Paris and make his home in Chile. However, Edwards' infatuation with life in Paris subverts this intention and provides a very different focus for the novel, whose real interest lies, not in the protagonist's rediscovery of his roots, but in Edwards' evocation of a city scene that embodies the denial of all those virtues he associates with the Chilean countryside. *Criollos en París* strikes me as a particularly interesting example of a novel at war with itself. In these pages, then, I explore the disparity between what I take to be Edwards' overt intention and his real interest, as well as the tension so apparent here between the non-narratable, represented by the hero's return to Chile, and the narratable: his prolonged existence in Paris.

Throughout his life, Edwards Bello was concerned with the problem of Chilean, and by extension Latin American, identity. What has been called "la tragedia del sudamericano expatriado en París" (Urbistondo 129) is simply one facet of a question which, for Edwards, was exacerbated by the rise of new classes and the displacement of the old land-owning aristocracy. In the novel, much of the hero's distaste for things Chilean is occasioned by "la avalancha de la clase media" (62), and his mother comments that "Se va la gente buena... quedan muy pocos apellidos conocidos en el Congreso... Los nombres de los diputados recuerdan las listas de los peones del fundo" (34). Edwards insists

that what counts in modern Chile is money: "En Chile, o está usted bien con los ricos, o muere" (209).[1] In *Criollos* the emblem of this new Chile is the financial swindle, a denial of standards of personal integrity and loyalty. It is the loss of their fortune in such a swindle that has driven the protagonist, Pedro Plaza, and his mother to Paris.[2]

Given this situation, what is the young aristocrat to do? The novel sets out to show that Pedro's answer — exile — is the wrong answer. He must be forced to realize that, as a friend tells him, "nosotros somos para América y hay que conformarse" (351). The chief instrument of Pedro's regeneration will be the Chilean Lucía. Through her Edwards presents an idealized image of the "true" Chile. Lucía is less a character than an evocation of the old order presiding over a combination of rural ways, a strict moral code and a tight domestic circle, seen here — as it is much literature — as natural, happy and innocent. Her songs recall "paseos en carreta, paisajes nativos, vacaciones, amores inexistentes, naturaleza dormida" (198), and she herself reminds Pedro of "lo mejor de su ninnnez" (62).

In line with his thesis, Edwards must demonstrate that Pedro's life in Paris is unnatural, wasteful and ultimately destructive, hence the repeated allusions to his wearing face powder, carrying cocaine and associating with spies, card sharks and kept men. But, of course, these suggestions are less off-putting than intriguing. To explain Pedro's willingness to forsake Paris, Edwards has him reduced to penury, deserted by his French mistress and hounded by the police. On top of all this, we are told that in wartime, "Ya París no era París" (356).

Not much concerned when it comes to creating a viable structure — he wrote hurriedly and did not revise — Edwards is brilliant at conveying the city scene.[3] His strength lies in the lively interest he takes in details of place and period. As a result, Paris emerges as dense, inhabited, fully realized. Chile remains shadowy, a precinct of childhood, distant in time as well as space. The novel is crammed with loving detail (Edwards himself lived at the small hotel at Pigalle 60 where he situates Pedro and his mother). If the characters drop by a bar or restaurant or hotel, he gives us the name, the street, the part of town. Through Pedro, Edwards shows off that he himself knows Paris "al dedillo" (88). He has a passion for novelty and is very partial to brand-names. With the chronicler's enthusiasm for being current, he mentions plays, drinks, menus, night spots, cafés, clothes, hair styles, dances, gossip, songs, shops.[4]

The idea of novelty is intimately related to the city, which is characterized by its state of constant change. It is appropriate that Pedro should be "un corredor de automóviles" (130), i.e. the purveyor of a new invention designed to put people in motion. He is also a regular at the restaurants in railway stations, where "le agradaba oír el tráfago de los andenes y mirar la gente desconocida que pasa un instante con guías y maletas y se va para siempre. Le deleitaba embriagarse con los ruidos de los viajeros" (88). Much of the narrative follows the itinerary of his restless sorties from bar to restaurant to brothel to dancehall and back to bar in search of whatever excitement streetlife offers. Pedro shows

absolutely no interest in becoming part of the world of upper-class Chileans resident in Paris, a circle he finds sterile and boring. Instead he reveals a marked preference for the romance of low life. Edwards has commented elsewhere that during his own early days in Paris he and his friends often felt overwhelmed by the grandeur of the city; "Solamente la libertad de la calle, con sus colores y sus ruidos, podría servirnos de puente para incorporarnos a esa realidad fabulosa" (*Memorias* 96). And it is on the streets, and the popular bars and cafés, that Pedro communes with the city. When Lucía asks him what he likes about Paris, he answers:

> — Las sensaciones que me da a cada instante.
> — Mediante el dinero.
> — No — dijo Pedro. — No se crea usted. Yo me divierto con sólo salir a vagar por ahí, mirando pasar la vida. (65)

Looking to the crowds for energy, Pedro is the consummate **flâneur**: "la multitud de una ciudad le atraía de una manera avasalladora; un detalle callejero encerraba mayor sentido artístico que cualquiera escena de garden party, de baile..." (347). Pedro's manifest disdain for the rounds of society and his cultivation of **les bas fonds** are a manifestation of the aristocrat's prerogative to follow his inclinations. His studied indolence, an implicit protest against the industriousness of the new classes back in Chile, is justified by his "sentido artístico." In fact, Pedro is a bit of a collector — not of titles or paintings or fine porcelains, but of sensations, neatly balancing the materialistic instinct by the evanescent nature of the collection. He nourishes "estas emociones de los arrables" (163),[5] and his real attraction to Lisette seems to lie in her familiarity with the street songs that speak of sordid love affairs.

> Oyéndola Pedro evocaba a París en su conjunto; pero no el París elegante ni simétrico, trazado con cuerdas por Haussman, sino otro París de rincones y callejuelas; la voz de Lisette le llevaba de la mano con las **midinettes** a la salida del taller; le hacía pasar por los suburbios, donde la última **gigollette** arregla su penacho de pelo rubio. Era el París turbulento y extrannno de las barreras, los bistrós, las ferias y el cuartito del último piso donde Mimi Pinson está cosiendo el traje de la Venus de las Acacias... (98)

Edwards, a collector himself, and a fan of the popular song, includes in the novel a number of such verses, which he argues in "Canciones Parisienses," serve as a kind of "utopía popular," presided over by "la musa de las calles" (*Memorias* 98). This popular utopia, of course, is the idealized version of the bohemian life passed down from Murger.

However, in Edwards' updated version, **la vie de bohème** centers, not on the **midinette** and her little garret room, but on the gambling house. In fact, a map labeled "Ubicación del Meridoneaux, punto central de la novela" serves as frontiespiece to *Criolllos*. The casino embodies the sensation of "permanent

transience"[6] that typifies the modern city. With its wildly mixed clientele, sprung from diverse countries and classes, it is the extreme expression of public life and a logical focal point for the **flâneur**. It is governed by chance, and what it offers is not so much the possibility of a quick fortune as the certainty of risk and the pleasure of irresponsibility.

Edwards calls gambling "la más fascinante de las pasiones" (*Memorias* 127). The Meridioneaux, whose emblem is a grasshopper singing in the sun, is the antithesis of the bourgeois virtues of home — both birthplace and domestic circle — that are ranged behind the figure of Lucía. It represents the denial of tradition, of position, of memory. It is what Pedro means when he exclaims, "La patría es una tierra de aventura que está más allá de donde se nace" (105). Similarly, in a passage from *The Gambler*, Dostoyevsky's protagonist comments:

> there really is something special in the feeling when, alone, in a strange country, far away from home and friends and not knowing what you will eat that day, you stake your last gulden, your very, very last![7]

The casino is perilously close to the stock market (the shady Williams is involved in both). They share the element of risk, the leveling of class differences, the prospect of making a fortune overnight. But there is an important difference on which Edwards insists: one is a game, the other a business. Those who play the market are motivated by profit and anxious for social ascent, whereas gamblers are primarily interested in the game itself: they usually divest themselves rapidly of their winnings by returning to the tables. So it is possible to assimilate the gamblers into an aristocracy of the spirit, no matter what their worldly ties, whereas the speculators, as Edwards sees it, remain beyond the pale.

Although Pedro supports his mother as well as himself with his winnings at the table, he continues to view gambling as a game; he does not really work at it, he just happens to be lucky. The same sense of play informs his attitude toward the city. Freed from routine, much like the grasshopper of La Fontaine's fable, he enjoys a prolonged vacation. The friend who urges him to return to Latin America because in Paris he will always be an outsider misses the point. The beauty of Pedro's life in Paris is precisely that he sees it as a visitor. Again, his attitude is that of the **flâneur**; he enjoys the spectacle without being fully a part of it:[8]

> Yo vivo entre gente que ni conoce mi pasado ni mi raza, ni me exige otra cosa que una cara simpática y alegre. Si les dijera de dónde soy, creerían que era broma... Nadie posee esa cosa absurda que se llama memoria. (22)

For the Canelejas, in Blest Gana's *Los trasplantados*, this lack of definition means a chance to gain the entrée into high society that is denied them in Santiago, where they are known. An obsession with social ascent converts their

new-found freedom into a bondage more absolute than the class-ridden conventions of turn-of-the-century Santiago. But for Pedro Plaza, who was born into a good family, the anonymity of Paris offers an opportunity to escape the strictures of "la gente bien." It holds out all the charm of indetermination; nothing is fixed, everything is potential.

In *Criollos*, then, Edwards addresses city experience directly. There is more. With its vagaries of plot and its erratic central character, [9] the novel, unconsciously I assume, embodies an important part of urban experience: the dispersal of attention typical of life in the big city, where the proliferation of points of interest exceeds the individual's apprehension. Here, to cite an example, is the scene that describes Pedro's proposal to Lucía:

> Pedro estaba esperando una oportunidad para arrancar las dudas de su corazón; a la descuidada se echó unas pastillas de Sen Sen en la boca, y poniéndose cerca de ella y mirándola en los ojos, le dijo... (257)

As though he were frightened of leaving out something that might be important, Edwards cannot resist the opportunity of bringing in a topical note even in a serious exchange. He is like the passerby he describes in the boulevards, simultaneously enthralled and tormented by faces, some beautiful, some ugly, that he will never see again: "uno queda desorientado, disperso, sin saber si seguir para allá o para acá" (156). His interest, our interest is deflected — to the Sen Sens, to the brand of cologne one of the Argentines is wearing, to the Saratoga cocktail, to the Bar de la Paix, "nido de citas, muy estratégico" (156), to the Chabannais brothel, which boasts Edward VII's bathtub and a musical bidet. This excess of detail that threatens to overwhelm plot and character produces sometimes grotesque effects, but it also gives a great impression of immediacy and something, too, of the feverish sensation of city life.[10]

The novel speaks for the charm of the transitory, even the ephemeral. The passerby's fascination with faces in a crowd recalls the poet's frenzied pursuit of the legs of unknown women in Gutiérez Nájara's little tale "Stora y las medias parisienses" as well as Baudelaire's "A une passante," in which the speaker's sudden longing for a woman glimpsed in the crowd is, as Benjamin comments, "not so much love at first sight as love at last sight" *CB* 45); that is, it is predicated on her being swept away immediately and irretrievably. The emotions, the events and the novelties that Edwards relates follow each other in quick succession.[11] It is appropriate, then, that *Criollos* should focus on the casino, where money won is money lost. The novel is all movement.

Yet oddly enough, this wondrous excess and volatility is bent into the service of a plot that sets out to purge itself of what interests the author most. It is, I think, significant that Pedro leaves France disguised as an old man. He is moving toward closure. The utopic future in which he marries Lucía and spends his days on horseback, in reality a return to the past, is left appropriately vague.

It is — to use D. A. Miller's term - the "nonnarratable."[12] In *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*, Murger makes it clear that when his would-be artists are ready to marry, they abandon Bohemia in favor of a return to their class and to the occupations of their fathers. Something similar happens in *Criollos*, but the transition is less convincing. For one thing, Murger's characters are assimilated into a functioning system which they accept as a necessary condition of life in the adult world. Too, they continue to live in Paris. However, Edwards, as we have seen, makes a point of excoriating the new classes in Chile, and Pedro insists that he is too generous to join in the scramble of the world of business (36). It is not clear at all what this couple that has just resolve to be "bien chileno" (398) is to do. Pedro's mother's prescription — "lo que a ti te falta es montar caballo y asolearte" (105) — hardly provides an answer.

José Luis Romero, commenting on "el ocio de esas nuevas generaciones de las viejas clases," suggests that their tendency to flee the cities and take refuge in the country was an abdication of struggle and an attempt to affirm the viability of a code whose time had passed:

> el campo parecía el ambiente propio de los sennnores y la afirmación de tal calidad consitutuía una despechada respuesta, y casi una venganza, a una sociedad que empezaba a estimar más otros valores. (262)

That is, like the flight to Paris, the flight to the country estate was a form of escapism. For Raymond Williams, by the early twentieth century there is no longer a working opposition between city and country, because by that time the country had become a kind of make-believe world, at least for the educated person:

> City experience was now becoming so widespread, and writers, disproportionately, were so deeply involved in it, that there seemed little reality in any other mode of life; all sources of perception seemed to begin and end in the city, and if there was anything beyond it, it was also beyond life. (235)

Even in areas like Latin America that retained great expanses of country at that time, it had become apparent that the decisions affecting the country as a whole were being made in the city. In writing *Criollos*, all indications are that Edwards intended to condemn the escapism that led many Chileans to desert their homes for Paris, but by the novel's end Pedro has simply opted for another form of escapism, this time with Edwards' approval: into the idealized past of the old order. But finally, if marriage to Lucía and the return to Chile sound like a form of punishment or a narrative suicide, it is the fault not only of social changes in Chile that Edwards was trying to wish away, but of his own success in communicating the seductive nature of life in the early twentieth-century Paris.

NOTES

1 *Criollos* takes place in 1913-1915, but Edwards clearly sees his comments as equally applicable to 1932, when the novel was written. By that time, following a period of affluence, Chile had been hit by the world-wide economic depression. The country had also been affected by economic hardship after the first world war. In other words, prosperity based on the market economy was not to be trusted.

2 José Luis Romero argues that the bourgeoisie in formation throughout Latin America in this period (1880's to World War II) was different from the aristocracy in that it lacked the sense of class solidarity that sprang from blood ties and family acquaintance. Instead, relationships were governed almost entirely by questions of individual interest. "Quiebras fraudulentas, suicidios, descensos a la última miseria desde los más altos niveles de la riqueza, fueron temas predilectos de la novela naturalista de la época... precisamente porque [la especulación] era el espectáculo revelador de esa sociedad cuya ley parecía ser el ascenso social fundada en la rápida conquista de la fortuna (269).

3 The huge modern city was the locus of and provided much of the stimulus for European and North American modernism. Malcolm Bradbury notes the parallel between urban life and artistic expression: "the cultural chaos bred by the populous, ever-growing city, a contingent and polyglot tower of Babel, is enacted in similar chaos, contingency, and plurality in the texts of modernist writing, the design and form of modernist painting" (98-99).

4 Germán Ewart's description of the author's archive brings to mind his method in this novel: "Su archivo se desborda en cada rincón y cada mueble de la casa de la calle Santo Domingo. 'Pídame lo que quiera' suele decir a sus visitas, y en cuestión de segundos halla lo solicitado. Cobre, cochero, coca, Cochrane, Cóctel, cocina vasca, cogotero, cophue... Los sobres con recortes, fotos y documentos atiborran cada rincón y cada mueble del 'living,' del comedor, del escritorio y del dormitorio" (Cited in Urbistondo 117). The novel may well have come out of an envelope marked "París: 1913-1915."

5 Paradoxically, part of this folklore includes the tango, which was the rage of Paris in the pre-war years and which was taken up enthusiastically by local prostitutes who learned it from visiting Argentines. It becomes as much a part of the lore of the underground as apache dancing. Pedro and Williams ends their evening's tour at La Capitole, where the Argentines are teaching the local talent to dance.

6 The expression is Carl Schorske's. Cited in William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock, eds. *Visions of the Modern City: Essays in History, Art, and Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1987) 7.

7 *The Gambler, Bobok, A Nasty Story*, trans. Jessie Coulson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966) 162.

8 Benjamin comments on the **flâneur**'s enjoyment **of** society as opposed to enjoyment **in** society although for him this stems for the **flâneur**'s status as **petit bourgeois** — like Baudelaire. I am, of course, using the term here to describe an outsider from a different period and different class, but I believe that the crisis of modernization

that faced Latin Americans early in this century is in some ways similar to the changes that urban Europeans from the industrialized nations faced in the second half of the nineteenth century.

9 Arturo Torres Rioseco points out that "Pedro Plaza tiene en su carácter muchas de las irregularidades psicológicas de Edwards" (306).

10 There are moments when *Criollos* has the texture and much of the delirium of Carpentier's *El recurso del método.*

11 In fact, Lucía's brother, Tonio, who initially appears to be the central figure is a victim of succession: he is soon dropped out of the novel and replaced by his friend Pedro.

12 *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981) 266.

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