

# José Enrique Rodó: The Birth of Latin America Out of Spiritual Revolt

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## Abstract

In the second half of the 19th century positivism became the official state doctrine of many countries in southern America. Around 1900, however, the authoritarian positivistic regimes were increasingly criticized due to their cultural imitation on the Anglo-Saxon world and the atheistic ideology. In this context, José Enrique Rodó, a poet and philosopher of Uruguay, called for a critical and creative re-adoption of the “Latin” roots of southern America, specifically Greek culture and early Christianity. In his essay “Ariel” (1900), Rodó sparked a spiritual revolt that especially affected the youth of the whole continent. In contrast to Nietzsche but on the basis of secular reason, Rodó defended a religion of love, which inspired important philosophies in the 20th century, from José Vasconcelos and Antonio Caso to the theologies and philosophies of liberation. Thus, “Latin America” as a self-designation of the South American peoples was essentially inaugurated through the spiritual revolt initiated by José Enrique Rodó.

## Keywords

philosophy of religion – Latin American philosophy – positivism

## Introduction

Fully unnoticed by the European public, on 1 May 1917, José Enrique Rodó dies in a hotel in Palermo, having worked for over a year in Spain, France and Italy as the correspondent for two Argentinian journals. The contrast with Montevideo was stark, where shortly after the telegram announcing his death

arrived, students gathered spontaneously. Which is unsurprising, for José Enrique Rodó was one of South America's best-known intellectuals at the turn of the century, a thinker seen as belonging to the *modernismo* movement along with Rubén Darío, José Martí and Faz Ferrero, and who laid the foundation for the forming of Latin American literature. With his essay "Ariel" (1900), a passionate appeal for a spiritual and moral deepening of life, Rodó had set off a youth revolt that gripped numerous countries throughout South America (Varela-Petito 2002, p. 61 et seq.). Moreover: Rodó linked the call to embark on a spiritual life with a return to the "Latin" roots of South American states, severed in the wars of independence at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This call to reflect and draw on "Latinity" was originally a French idea, utilised by France under Napoleon III to justify the country's imperial interests vis-à-vis the superior power of Britain and the emergence of an ambitious United States.<sup>1</sup> José Enrique Rodó detached the idea of "Latinity" from the context of French imperialism and rehabilitated the Romance cultural tradition, making it an integral component of a new self-understanding of the southern American states. The term "Latin America" customarily used down to the present day was thus decisively influenced by the literary and philosophical work of José Enrique Rodó.

## 1 The Biographical and Socio-historical Context of Rodó's Thought

The fin de siècle marks for the Spanish-speaking world a decisive turn, both politically and culturally. Spain lost its last colonies in the Spanish-American War. The irrevocable demise of the Spanish world empire sparked efforts to renew Spain's cultural identity amongst the so-called Generación 98, to which Joaquim Costa and Miguel de Unamuno belonged. In southern America however, the victory of the United States had very different consequences. On the one hand, after decades of fighting, Cuba finally, if somewhat belatedly, gained independence; on the other hand, after defeating Spain, the United States, itself still a British colony in the eighteenth century, now suddenly emerged as a new imperial power.

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1 The pan-Latin ideology was essentially developed by Michel Chevalier, a French economist. According to Chevalier, the Latin Mediterranean culture, based on the Romance languages, needed to unite under French leadership if it was to assert itself vis-à-vis the German-Anglo Saxon and the Slavic worlds. In Mexico voices had already stated the need for a Latinate America as the United States conquered California; see Phelan 1982; Shawcross 2018, pp. 119–158.

The geo-political power shift in favour of the United States triggered a multifaceted and far-reaching process of cultural and political reorientation in southern America. Since the mid-nineteenth century the United States had been a civilizing role model for the young states of Latin America. Following the dashing of Simon Bolívar's dream of a republican union of the Americas, and with the young states on the verge of plunging into countless civil wars between monarchists and republicans, a group of intellectuals known as the *Generación 37* sought to find solutions for the problems besetting the young states, first in liberalism and then in positivism.<sup>2</sup> The European ideologies could however, as programmatically demanded by the Argentinian Juan Bautista Alberdi in his idea of a "filosofía americana", not be simply adopted as they were, but needed to be adapted and transformed in the light of the specific socio-historical contexts of southern America (Fornet-Betancourt 1988). In his work *Facundo o Civilización y Barbarie* (1845), which uniquely interconnects literary, socio-political and historical perspectives, Faustino Domingo Sarmiento analysed the heterogeneous life-worlds of Argentina, which ranged from the hypermodern Buenos Aires through to medieval Córdoba and the vastness of the pampa.<sup>3</sup> Like Alberdi, Sarmiento predicted that southern America would witness a struggle between civilisation and barbarism. The small stratum of liberal-minded bourgeois were seen as the bearers of civilisation, while barbarism was assigned to the indigenous population, but also to the creoles if they were still imprisoned in the clerical and colonial mind set. Alberdi and Sarmiento proposed two instruments for modernising the southern American states: firstly, a radical education reform which was to replace scholastic thinking with modern science; and secondly, the launching of an offensive immigration policy, enlisting European workers to expand the industrial base. The slogan was: "Regnar es poblar". Because parts of Europe had strayed from the path of progress by joining the Holy Alliance, for Sarmiento's generation the United States became the desired role model of civilising progress. In *El Evangelio Americano* (1864) Francisco Bilbao postulated that southern America needed to completely detach itself from Spain (*desespañolizarse*).<sup>4</sup>

In the second half of the nineteenth century, intellectuals adapted positivism and it rose to the status of a state doctrine in many countries of southern America. The modernising of economies, aided by foreign capital, was accorded top priority and considered more important than liberal demands for democratic reforms. José Enrique Rodó is also influenced by positivism early on, in

2 See Beorlegui 2004, pp. 207–230.

3 See Sarmiento 2003.

4 Bilbao 2013, p. 338: "*Al sur los Estado Des – Unides, cuyo progreso consiste en desespañolizarse.*"

particular the variants formulated by Comte, Renan, Taine and Spencer. And yet, even at this stage Rodó articulates serious doubts about positivist thought in the programmatic essay “El que vendra” (1896), claiming that it sacrifices “all intimate things, all the eternal inner voices, which make up at least half of human art, as burnt offerings (holocaust) on the altars of immutable objectivity” (Rodó 1967, pp. 150 et seq.). The aesthetic protests against the dominance of modern science, brought forward above all by the Parnass artist movement, but also the newly awakened religious nostalgia for the Orient, fail to satisfy Rodó. His critical view of the intellectual movements of the present age thus result in a sobering assessment: “Our hearts and our thinking are riddled with numerous fears which have never found expression in a form [...], so many pains for which the balsam remains unknown” (Rodó 1967, p. 153). As Rodó sees it, the prevailing positivism has “revealed its inability to relate to the current needs of the spirit, which with a sense of premonition is embarking to new and unknown regions” (Rodó 1967, p. 146). Given this pessimistic diagnosis of the times, the only hope Rodó can conceive is that of a saviour: “Revelator! Prophet, feared by those who obstinately cling to rotting phrases and expected by the nostalgic souls [...]. What will you speak of so that our word vibrates, our faith is sparked, and virtue triumphs over indifference” (Rodó 1967, pp. 153 et seq.). The yearning kindling the hope for the advent of a new prophet is so great that Rodó does not shy away from employing religious imagery: “Guided by the word like the star of Bethlehem we will witness a new dawn, namely the rebirth of the ideal [...]. And your word will again resonate in our spirit, ringing like the pealing of bells at Easter” (Rodó 1967, p. 154).

With his essay “Ariel” (1900) it was Rodó himself – no doubt much to his own surprise – who became the very prophet of the rebirth of the ideal he evoked in youthful enthusiasm. As Rodó commented in “Rumbos nuevos” (1910), the resultant “Arielismo” cannot exhaust itself however in upholding some vague hope for a dawning of a new spiritual age, but needs to be precisely situated in the postcolonial history of southern America.

For Rodó, the independence struggles were rightly directed “against the limits and shoddiness of colonial education” (Rodó 1967, pp. 515 et seq.). The fatal mistake was instigating a radical break with the past, which sprung forth from “an impatient and generous longing”. The hasty attempt to “integrate the Hispanic-American societies into the progressive movement of the world” necessitated the “improvisation of a new collective personality” (Rodó, 1967, p. 516). In the abrupt turn away from their own history, the young states succumbed to a dangerous “illusion, comparable to the illusion that one can evade the enemy by turning your back and thus no longer see him. This fundamental error robbed the constructive work achieved by the collectives of heroes [i.e.

of the independence struggles] of its vigour and potency" (Rodó, 1967, p. 516). Although the conservative parties remained faithful to the Spanish heritage, for them the tradition was not the starting point for a future renewal but a sanctuary for a regressive movement. Ibero-America's recourse to "the roots of its existence and the emblems of its inherited civilisation" must be – as Rodó vehemently emphasises – open however "for all the longings of freedom and all the forward-looking capabilities. Filled with a modern spirit, human capaciousness and universal sympathy" (Rodó, 1967, p. 516).

Amidst the aggressive modernization project, a "consciousness of race [has] awakened", for Rodó the defining feature of Latin American thinking at the end of the nineteenth century (Rodó 1967, p. 517). The term "raza" is not a biological concept here, but stands for the cultural and historical entity of the *pueblos latinos* in southern America. The "awakening of a consciousness of race" expresses the socio-cultural reality of southern America that had evolved since the sixteenth century, a reality systematically ignored since the wars of independence and further weakened by the massive immigration from Europe in recent years (Rodó 1967, p. 517). Southern America is not a tabula rasa that can be randomly inscribed with European ideologies and migrants.

## 2 The Cultural Vision of a "Latin America": The Recourse to Classical Greek Antiquity and Early Christianity

For Rodó, since the end of the nineteenth century it was clear that Hispanic America's opening towards global modernity demanded a reorientation. By the time of the Spanish-American War at the latest, southern America was confronted with a new imperial power. Accordingly, in "Ariel" Rodó considers how a return to the Iberian heritage is possible without sliding into nationalistic isolationism.

In the late nineteenth century Spain was regarded to be a decrepit and rotting empire, defeated by a young emergent power, the United States, a view that also left its mark on southern America. Rodó counters the correspondingly pessimistic diagnosis of the "sick continent"<sup>5</sup> by emphatically appealing to youth. The essay "Ariel" is expressly dedicated to the youth ("a la juventud"). Prospero, in Rodó's essay a university teacher addressing his students at the end of semester, appeals to the youthful vigour of his audience: "The youth which you love is a power whose application you must work yourselves, and

5 Immediately before Rodó's "Ariel", a series of extremely pessimistic diagnoses on the state of southern America were published, foremost César Zumeta's *Continente enfermo* (1899) and Alcides Arguedas's *El pueblo enfermo* (1899); see Ainsa 2002, p. 193.

a treasury for the use of which yourselves are responsible.” (Rodó 1922, p. 8) Standing in the auditorium is a bronze statue depicting Ariel, the Spirit of the Air, “at the moment where, freed by the magic of Prospero, he is about to soar into the sky, there to vanish in a lightning flash.” (Rodó 1922, p. 4) As the symbol of the new idealism Rodó had proclaimed a few years before, Ariel embodies

... the mastery of reason and of sentiment over the baser impulses of unreason. He is the generous zeal, the lofty and disinterested motive in action, the spirituality of civilization, and the vivacity and grace of the intelligence; – the ideal end to which human selection aspires; that superman in whom has disappeared, under the persistent chisel of life, the last stubborn trace of the *Caliban*, symbol of sensuality and stupidity.

RODÓ 1922, p. 4

In searching for the spiritual sources of a cultural renewal, one that is to be able to move in a direction distinctive to the Anglo-Saxon mind while however preserving the heritage of Iberian powers, Rodó turns to classical Greek antiquity and early Christianity. Greece – the soul when it is “young” (Rodó 1922, p. 12) – was unjustly scorned as puerile by the Egyptian priests because of its restlessness and volatility:

But of that divine game of children on the beaches of the Archipelago and in the shadow of the olives of Ionia, were born art, and philosophy, and free thought, and the curiosity of all investigation, and the consciousness of human dignity – all those God-given spurs which are yet our only inspiration and our pride.

RODÓ 1922, p. 13

Early Christianity is also, as Rodó emphasises taking up Ernest Renan’s idea, “essentially an inspiration of youth, or was before it wandered from its cradle”, presenting “a picture of youth unsullied.” (Rodó 1922, pp. 14 et seq.) Imagery like “the birds of heaven and the ‘lilies of the field’” show how “the happiness of the ‘Kingdom of God’” was spread to a “sweetly smiling nature.” (Rodó 1922, p. 15)

This return to the youthful spirit of classical Greek antiquity and early Christianity serves as the starting point for Rodó’s radical two-pronged criticism of the liberal and positivistic ideologies on the one hand and the Churches on the other. The atheist ideologies of the nineteenth century may have radically expanded the outward realm of human influence, but they have simultaneously mutilated the spirit of man. In contrast to Comte, whose thinking was still imbued with an idealistic magnanimity, thanks to “utilitarian empiricism” a “superstitious conception of the empirical sciences” has meanwhile spread

through southern America, i.e. “an exclusive orientation on material interests [...] a disdain for and false notion of every free activity not driven by interests; an indifference towards everything that transcends the limits of what is directly purposive, articulated in the concepts of the *practical* or the *useful*” (Rodó 1967, p. 519).

Rodó prises open such a reduction of spiritual life to utility in two ways: by insisting on the union of moral and aesthetic, and by reflecting on the abyss of human life, only possible by radically withdrawing from the world. This twofold transcending of positivistic horizons of meaning is illustrated with the imagery of an Oriental royal palace. The king, renowned to posterity for his hospitality and immeasurable compassion, opened the palace gates for the needy and heavyhearted. “His palace was the house of the people. All was liberty and life within that august portal, which never knew a guard” (Rodó 1922, p. 34). The palace was also where traders gathered and peddled fabrics, jewellery and scents, as well as offering harried pilgrims sanctuary. Even “nature herself seemed attracted by his largess – the winds, the birds, the very plants, seemed, as in the myth of Orpheus or the legend of Assisi, to seek man’s companionship in that oasis of peace” (Rodó 1922, p. 35). The colourful and sociable palace life symbolizes the union of aesthetics and morality, one in which the “freedom of Paradise” and “a mighty sharing of trust” between man and nature reigns, life in its walls the celebrating of a “continuous holy day”. But deep within the palace was a “hall of mystery”, “hidden from the vulgar eye like the lost chapel of Uhland in the heart of the forest” and surrounded by walls which no noise, no sounds of nature and no human word could penetrate. It is here, where only the king himself ventured to set foot, that “a religious silence brooded on the chastity of its sleeping air”, inviting – so Rodó – a “heavenly calm”. Dwelling here the king “turned his vision inward, smoothed and refined his thought in meditation like the pebbles all polished by the wave [...] And then, at last, when Death came to remind him that he himself had been but a guest in that palace, the impenetrable house was locked and mute forever; forever sunken into infinite repose.” (Rodó 1922, pp. 37 et seq.)

The imagery of the palace expresses Rodó’s vision of a dual renewal – cultural and spiritual. On the one hand, Rodó demands an openness to “all the currents of the world”, while on the other he calls for an inward turn, to dare to enter the “inner forum hidden from all” where “serene reason alone” rules. (Rodó 1922, p. 38) It is only here, at this “inviolable sanctuary”, will you – as Rodó in the voice of Prospero calls to the young – be able to “call yourselves free men.” And once here, then “to think, to dream, to admire – these are the ministrants that haunt my cell.” (Rodó 1922, pp. 38 et seq.)

With this dual imagery Rodó illustrates the relationship between religion and morality which, despite their reciprocal relationship, remain clearly distinct from one another. The recourse to early Christianity is not limited to the Jesuanic morality, i.e. to merely inheriting the morality encapsulated in the religions. Rodó is rather aiming at a renewal of religion as such, more precisely the experience of the infinite secret. In *Liberalismo y jacobinismo* (1906), Rodó writes in the appendix entitled “The Religious Sentiment and Criticism”:

The apprehension about the infinite secret is immortally etched in human consciousness. Our inability to explain it only serves to invigorate the irresistible temptation it holds out to us; even if the possibility exists that this temptation extinguishes itself, this will not be without sacrificing the deepest sources of idealism for life and exaltation for thought. The hidden reason of all that surrounds us, the origin from where we come, the destination we are heading for – these will always disconcert us, and nothing can replace the religious sentiment as the way to pacify the necessity of our moral nature. For in relation to the absolute of the mystery, every positive explanation of things remains ill-fated, due to an infinite disparity which can only be filled through the absolute illumination of belief. Seen in this light, the legitimacy of religious belief is evidential.

RODÓ 1967, p. 296

By no means does Rodó combine the defence of religion with uncritical support for the Catholic Church, which opposed liberal and positivist modernisation programmes not just because of their atheism but also due to the massive dispossession of Church property. In contrast, Rodó, like Renan, sees himself as a freethinker, who in the spirit of the Enlightenment thinkers of the eighteenth century fiercely reject every form of religious authoritarianism and fanaticism propagated and practiced by the churches. Meanwhile however, a new secular dogmatism has arisen according to Rodó, one that not only opposes the power of the churches but moreover also suppresses the questions originally underlying the religions. Thus, in the name of Enlightenment, new prejudices have arisen; in the anticlerical fury one fanaticism has simply replaced another (Rodó 1967, pp. 291–295). The questions posed by religion – so Rodó’s demand – need to be broached and discussed in the medium of finite reason, just like all other questions. A dialogue on religious sentiment demands a special sensibility for the limits of human reason:



We are on the way; you speak to me of your belief and the love that you hold, with earnestness and enthusiasm; I listen to you with interest. When it is my turn, I will speak of the same intimate truth, from the way in which the attractive force of this vast secret becomes imprinted on my soul, and of what I believe, and of what I doubt; and you will listen to me; and so we will both gain. For the only thing that does not benefit the spirit is duplicity, vulgarity, the fanatic passion; on the one side, the discourse of the grand cleric, without love and without sensitivity, on the other the railings of the furious Jacobite, without edification and without culture.

RODÓ 1967, p. 298

The appeal for an open dialogue does not mean however that the actual problem – can the questions of religion be revived and reconsidered today in an undogmatic way, and if so how – is resolved. And because doubt is not to be suppressed, then according to Rodó religious thinking has to face up to the positivist criticism of not only traditional metaphysics, but also of Kantian transcendental philosophy. This means: the spheres of the good, true and beautiful, free of interest, but also mercy, can no longer be understood, as in Plato, as part of an eternal transcendental order. But also the modern proofs of God's existence, whereby "God" is understood either as an innate idea (Descartes) or as a postulate of practical reason (Kant), fail to stand up to positivist criticism. From this background all that remains for Rodó is the general recourse to the movement of life. Initially on his own but soon inspired by Henri Bergson, whose work was broadly influential early on in Latin America, Rodó transforms evolutionistic naturalism into a philosophy of life. For Rodó, a hidden power is already at work in biological evolution which elevates life into ever higher and more complex forms. But since our prehistoric beginnings, a creative principle of life is manifesting in human history, producing increasingly complex cultures and civilisations. Even Ariel the air spirit – the symbol for the aesthetic, intellectual and moral rising of the human spirit – is ultimately borne by a cosmic life force that perpetuates and expresses itself in the cultural development of humanity.

Ariel is, to *nature*, that crowning of its work which ends the ascending process of organic life with the call of the spirit. [...] He is the eponymous hero in the *épopée* of man, the immortal protagonist, since first his presence inspired the feeble struggles of reason in primitive man, when he first knitted his brow in the effort to shape the flint, or to scratch rude drawings on a reindeer's bones.

RODÓ 1922, pp. 144 et seq.

In short: “His invincible power has as its impulse every uplifting moment of a human life” (Rodó 1922, p. 145). The references to a cosmic life force do not lead into a speculative philosophy of the absolute; rather, “more than thinking the absolute as a problem he feels it as a secret” (Ardao 1987, p. 263). In the infinite secret man encounters a power that is more powerful than all designs, also potent “towards our frightened consciousness”, that as an experience befalling man compels “its tormenting and terrible inquiry”. “The deepest source of his religiosity was,” as Arturo Ardao has written, “not what he found in books; it was the existential of pain, the bitter divinity that almost always is named in capital letters” (Ardao 1987, p. 264).

### 3 Defending Christian Morality and Democracy – Against Nietzsche

With the turn to *Lebensphilosophie*, Rodó’s thought shifted towards Nietzsche and the intellectual aristocratism of the late nineteenth century. Ernest Renan, from whom Rodó drew inspiration at an earlier stage, also categorically rejected democracy due to its levelling effect on intellectual life. Renan’s *Caliban*,<sup>6</sup> conceived as a continuation of Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, expresses vividly his anti-democratic attitude: Prospero returns to Milan, while Ariel, symbol of spiritual life, does not accept the freedom promised. Instead, Caliban, symbol of the uneducated mass, initiates a revolt against his mentor Prospero. Caliban’s victory is therefore a metaphor for democracy, the creative elite ousted by the masses, the mediocre.<sup>7</sup> Unlike Renan however, Nietzsche’s intellectual aristocratism not only turns against democracy but also Christian morality, which is denounced as slave morality (Losurdo 2012). At this point Rodó, whose thought has been repeatedly criticised for being epigonic, breaks – showing remarkable resoluteness – with both Renan and Nietzsche. Despite opting for an intellectual aristocracy, Rodó justifies Christian morality and modern democracy. It is no coincidence that the key chapter of Ariel opens with the words, “Thus spoke Prospero”, a critical allusion to Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.<sup>8</sup>

6 Renan 1878.

7 See Geweke 1984, p. 171 et seq.

8 See Rodó 1994, p. 189; and Ette 1994.

### 3.1 *The Union of Christian Morality and Classical Greek Clarity and Elegance*

According to Rodó, moral revolutions do not arise out of the promulgation of a new law, but are sparked by “enthusiasm”, “a passion, a belief” (Rodó 1967, p. 275). The great moral reformers were “creators of feelings, not the disseminators of ideas” (Rodó 1967, p. 275). This approach enables Rodó to claim that Christian morality has not arisen out of the resentment of the weak, but stems from a practice of radical devotion, one that draws on the profoundest sources of life.

The originality of the work of Jesus lies not indeed in the literal acceptance of his doctrine – since that might be found entirely without leaving the teachings of the Synagogue, searching for it from the book of *Deuteronomy* to the *Talmud* – but in having, by his preaching, made felt the poetry of his precept, that is, its inner beauty.

RODÓ 1922, p. 48

This background makes Rodó’s intervention in the crucifix dispute in Uruguay understandable. Liberal and positivist circles had demanded that crucifixes be removed from state hospitals. As Rodó saw it, because the work of Jesus is the personification of radical love, then the cross also represents for atheists and freethinkers simply “the pure model of love and selflessness” (Rodó 1967, p. 258). It is only Christians who see a crucifix as a religious symbol for redemption from sinfulness. Rodó is completely bewildered by the proposal put forward by liberal secularists, to replace the cross with a portrait of Kant. For Rodó, Kant is the symbol par excellence of an abstract moral of laws in which feelings are largely ignored. In contrast to Kant, who, had he even lived a thousand years like the Brahman deities, would have moved scarcely a single person to practice a moral life, with their simple words or conduct of life Jesus, Buddha, Francis of Assisi and Luther succeeded in touching the hearts of not just individuals but entire peoples.<sup>9</sup>

Against Nietzsche’s criticism, Rodó not only defends Christian morality but also the synthesis of Christianity and Greek philosophy. Due to its extreme radicalness, Rodó considers Christian morality to be like a concentrate, needing to be diluted by the clear waters of Greek thought for its positive effect to unfold completely and effectively. Conversely, Greek antiquity, which had never appreciated and proclaimed selfless love in its overwhelming power, is dependent on Christianity.

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<sup>9</sup> See Rodó 1967, p. 282.

The work of Greece is the cult of plastic and serene perfection: the formation of noble, strong, harmonious human creatures, rich in abilities and potencies to expand [...] In executing this work the weak remains forgotten, the sad remains excluded [...]. Wherever freedom is not accompanied by a vital feeling of human solidarity, then egoism will always be the unavoidable shadow of the image. Compassion, never very tender nor selfless, not even between those united by the bonds of citizenship, encounters its limit in this shadow, where the slave and barbarian dwelled.

RODÓ 1967, p. 274

Morality is not intrinsically dependent on the aesthetic. While “the sanctity of goodness purifies and exalts even things of gross exterior,” and there is no need for “the outward charm of beauty”, “charity, affection, can become sublime with means that are common, unlovely, even coarse” (Rodó 1922, p. 44). And yet, Rodó nevertheless sees in the sense of beauty “the most efficacious collaborator in the forming of a delicate sense of justice” (Rodó 1922, p. 44). In early Christianity, and more precisely in Paul, whom Nietzsche despised, Rodó finds, for at least a brief time, a fruitful encounter between Greek culture and Christianity.

It was when the word of new-born Christianity came to Greek colonies in Macedonia with Saint Paul; to Thessaly and Philippi the Evangel, still pure, informed the soul of those refined and spiritual communities, in whom the seal of Hellenic culture maintained an enchanting native distinction. One might have hoped then that the two ideals most lofty that the world had known were going now to be united for all time. In the epistolary style of Saint Paul lingers a trace of that moment when charity was being Hellenized. But that sweet union did not last.

RODÓ 1922, pp. 50 et seq.

A short time later and the paths diverge, Greek aesthetics and Biblical charity go their separate ways. Monastic asceticism banished aesthetics from Christian life; a narrow-minded dogmatism suppressed freedom of thought. The fatal separation between Greek antiquity and Christian religion continued on into the modern age. While the Renaissance in its impetuous rehabilitation of antiquity neglected Christian morality, the Christian banishment of beauty continued in puritanism. (Rodó 1994, 99 et seq.) According to Rodó, a genuine renewal of morality must “dream that the Christian ideal again were reconciled with the serene and luminous joy of ancient times, and that again the Evangel was being spread in Philippi and Thessaly.” (Rodó 1922, p. 51) In short:

“The perfection of human morality would be to cast the spirit of charity in the moulds of Grecian elegance.” (Rodó 1922, p. 50)

### 3.2 *The Reconciliation between the Spiritual Aristocracy and Democracy and the Indigenous People*

In an age characterised by diverse strands of antidemocratic thought, spanning both clerical circles, in particular anti-modern Catholicism, as well as secular movements (Social Darwinism, Nietzscheism), Rodó vehemently defends democracy. While acknowledging the danger of corrosive levelling, Rodó firmly believes that committed educational and cultural policies, geared in particular towards fostering talents, could avert this tendency. In Rodó’s view, the birth aristocracy, defended by Renan, contradicts however the fundamental principle of Christian morality. Rodó thus opts for a meritocratic aristocracy within the framework of a modern democracy,<sup>10</sup> an option once more underpinned by the propagated reconciliation between Greek antiquity and early Christianity. This would fit because “the spirit of Christianity” contributes the “sentiment of equality” to political philosophy; its flaw is an “ascetic disdain for culture and selection of spirit.” (Rodó 1922, pp. 87 et seq.) In contrast, the Greco-Roman civilisation gives rise to and strengthens the “sense for order, for authority, and the almost religious respect for genius”; its flaw is an “aristocratic disdain for the weak and lowly.” (Rodó 1922, p. 88.) It is only through attaining a “harmony” between these “two historic forces which give our civilisation its essential character, its regulative principles of life” (Rodó 1922, p. 87) that a democracy can arise which moves beyond stultifying levelling and aristocratic arrogance.

Nonetheless, Rodó is not content with this idyllic vision of a synthesis between an intellectual aristocracy and democracy, but also seeks to integrate, critically, the process of modern industrialisation. “Ariel” is frequently read as a criticism of the industrialised culture of the United States. Crucial here is that Rodó refrains from contrasting the United States, undoubtedly described as embodying the utilitarian and positivist spirit, with an idealised vision of a culturally superior Latin America. For Rodó, positivism remains an irreplaceable cornerstone of modern civilisation.

The work of North American positivism will also at the end serve the cause of Ariel. That which this people of Cyclops have achieved for the direct purpose of material advantage, with all their sense for what is useful and their admirable faculty of mechanical invention, will be converted

10 For a critical appraisal, see Szigalski 2012, pp. 223 et seq.

by other peoples, or later, even by themselves, to a wealth of material for the higher selection.

RODÓ 1922, pp. 25 et seq.

The integration of the achievements of positivistic modernisation is where, according to Rodó, the new idealism ultimately shows itself to be distinct from the utopias promulgated by the heroes of the independence wars and the chimeras of the Romantics. A look at history, in particular the Renaissance, suffices to show that economic prosperity and cultural awakening are not mutually exclusive, but indeed can reciprocally stimulate and enrichen one another.

Furthermore, Rodó appreciatively acknowledges numerous achievements of the United States, first and foremost the establishing of a stable democracy, but also the pursuit of the work ethic. Conversely, Rodó's criticism of positivism is not directed solely at the United States, but also targets the elite of southern America. And not least, in "Ariel" Rodó does not present an idealising description of the status quo in the states of Latin America, but a vision for the future, the pivot of which is, paradoxically, the re-appropriating of the past, for "we cannot sever the ties to Spain without losing our continuity" (Rodó 1967, p. 1210).

Rodó's vision of a Latin America reveals a painful lacuna however. As already noted and criticised by contemporaries, his synthesis of Christian morality and the spirit of classical Greece completely passes over the indigenous peoples of America. In contrast to Rodó, in his famous essay "Nuestra América" (1891) José Martí had acknowledged the indigenous peoples as the mother culture for all, including the Creole population of southern America. The marginalisation of the indigenous peoples in the cultural consciousness implicitly represents, as Martí vehemently reproaches the Creoles, a scandalous self-denial: "These men born in América, ashamed of the mother who raised them because she wears an Indian tunic! These scoundrels who disown their sick mother and leave her alone in her sickbed!" (Martí, *Our America*). In short: America can only save itself together with its indigenous peoples, not by ignoring them. For this reason Martí demands that the close ties to European culture be loosened. While Martí is by no means anti-European, if the fledgling states in southern America are to be able to ever govern properly, then the education institutions must re-orientate their focus onto the cultural reality of the continent. This means: "The European university must yield to the American university. The history of América from the Incas to the present must be taught in its smallest detail, even if the Greek Archons go untaught." (Martí, *Our America*)

Although in the question of the indigenous peoples Rodó lags far behind Martí, his “filosofía americana” is much more than some simple uncritical Europeanism. The recourse to America’s Latin roots must resist all the myriad restorative temptations. It is for this reason that Rodó strongly criticises any attempt to glorify the violent history of the Conquista and the colonial era. “The impressive captains of the Conquista, the legendary conquerors of the seas and the land, possess a character that excludes the full American apotheosis”, for they are simultaneously “personifications of the brutal execution”, above all “the sacrificing of the Indian, who” – as Rodó emphasises shortly before his death in a cautious move towards Martí’s position – “is also the body and soul of America [sic!].” (Rodó 1967, p. 121) The indigenous peoples must therefore become part of the collective memory, something that cannot be achieved solely through prosaic historical studies but fostered primarily by aesthetic literary works.<sup>11</sup>

Just like this recourse to America’s Latin roots, the integration of the Indians must be prevented from sliding into restorative models. Then for Rodó ancient Greece and early Christianity are by no means completely perfected paradigms, but rather sources, and the vigour and power they provide are to be first and foremost harnessed for creatively forging a modern identity. It is thus only consequential when he sees his own ideas for a “Latin American identity” as experimental in character and open to criticism. In his late work Rodó declared Proteus to be the symbol of modern identity:<sup>12</sup> life moves forward in a process of permanent renewal, “vivir es reformarse” (Rodó 1967, p. 309). Maintaining the integrity of one’s own past necessarily excludes any form of isolationism.

No firm training of the intelligence can be based on simple-minded isolation or on voluntary ignorance. Every problem proposed to human thought by the spirit of Doubt [...] has a right to reach our consciousness and there be considered and faced. The strength of our heart must show itself in accepting the riddle of the Sphinx; not in evading its awesome question.

RODÓ 1922, p. 21

11 How seriously Rodó took the integration of the Indian peoples into the cultural memory of Latin America is shown by his essay *Juan María Gutiérrez y su época*; in the section “El sentimiento de la historia” he undertakes an astonishingly detailed examination of literary representations of indigenous life since Inca Garcilaso de la Vega and Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga.

12 See Rodó 1967, pp. 299–495 (*Motivos de Proteo*, 1909).

#### 4 Outlook: The History of Rodó's Influence

José Enrique Rodó's influence was not restricted to the youth rebellion of 1900, which in any case soon faded from view. As a few examples shall show, Rodó's work has left an indelible mark on Latin American intellectual history. Amongst the "Ateneo de la Juventud", a group of intellectuals inspired by *Lebensphilosophie* who sharpened their criticism of positivism shortly before the Mexican Revolution, Rodó is regarded as an intellectual authority. In a public lecture series from 1910, Pedro Henriquez Ureña pays detailed tribute to Rodó's work (Ureña 2000). Rodó's defence of religion and Christian love against Nietzschean and naturalist criticisms influenced important currents of Latin American philosophy in the twentieth century. José Vasconcelos integrated love into an aesthetic monism.<sup>13</sup> Antonio Caso placed Christian love at the centre of his main work, *La existencia como economía, como desinterés y como caridad. Ensayo sobre la esencia del cristianismo* (1916). Even if direct influences on Marxist thought are hardly discernible, it needs to be kept in mind that José Carlos Mariátegui, the founder of Latin American Marxism, criticised atheism as a bourgeois ideology. According to him, Marxism must therefore absorb the religious dimension while simultaneously respecting the religious traditions of the indigenous peoples if it is to reach the hearts of the people as a social movement.<sup>14</sup> After the Second World War it has mainly been the theologians and philosophers of liberation who – under the slogan "option for the poor" – have reformulated Christian love in the light of modern and neo-Marxist ideas. Enrique Dussel, the main proponent of liberation philosophy, initially turned to – as Rodó had – the Greek and Biblical or Semitic cultures of the ancient world for inspiration in his search for the cultural roots of Latin America.<sup>15</sup>

In the context of dependency theory, Fernando Retamar reinterpreted Rodó's idiosyncratic descriptions of Shakespeare's characters. According to Fernando Retamar, there is no conflict between Ariel and Caliban, for both are slaves of Prospero, the colonizer. Thus, Caliban becomes a symbol of resistance to Western hegemony and has to rely on its own sources.<sup>16</sup>

Against this background it becomes clear that José Enrique Rodó's passionate appeal for an ethical-spiritual awakening in Latin America did not remain

13 See Vasconcelos 1939; 1952.

14 See Mariátegui 1971, pp. 124–152.

15 See Dussel 1969; 1976. At the same time, Dussel – inspired by Ricœur – does not aim to reconcile but instead strictly distinguish the dramatic ethos of the Bible from the tragic ethos of the Greeks; see Schelkshorn 1992, pp. 33–96.

16 See Retamar 1989.



some literary flash in the pan; his cultural reorientation, inaugurated through philosophical and aesthetic reflections, has become deeply etched in the cultural memory of Latin America.

### Biography

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*Translated by Paul Bowman*