SUSPENSIO ANIMI, OR THE INTERWEAVING
OF MYSTICISM AND ARTISTIC CREATION

Elena del Río Parra

The first paradox of the mystic is to place himself in language, point us from language and with language towards an experience that language is unable to host.

—José Ángel Valente, Essay on Miguel de Molinos

The average reader is usually able to recognize in specific literary texts a state identifiable with ataraxia, defined as “[t]he state of tranquility or imperturbability, freedom from anxiety, considered to be one of the desirable results of an immersion in skepticism, and by Epicureans to be part of the highest forms of happiness”.1 This state becomes palpable in the works of contemporary authors such as Franz Kafka. This kind of attitude—although quite far from its Epicurean roots and to be distinguished from apathia (the absence of passion) and afairesis (“removal” in rhetoric; “abstraction” in mathematics, non-metaphysical)—becomes increasingly evident in literature from the end of the 19th century. This is a time when consciousness reveals itself as the main character in a strange form of personification, one which unleashes states including existential boredom, indifference, and processes of automatic perception that find an answer in art as a way to combat them. However, the various forms of ataraxia are not exclusive to post-Industrial Revolution and Freudian trademarks. Literary expressions occurring after the historical Avant-garde have bequeathed us a large variety of works where consciousness unfolds its numerous states, among which can be pointed out its radical and emancipating breach from the individual, its multiple personalities, or its ever-unsettling absence.2

2 Peter Rossbacher has done extensive research on existential boredom, indifference, processes of automatic perception, and the art theories that derive from these: “Šklovskij’s Concept of Ostranenie and Aristotle’s Admiratio,” Modern Language Notes 92.5 (1977): 1038–43.
The present work intends to establish some coordinates for the phenomenon of self-detachment—of one’s conscience, judgement, and sense—and its creative manifestations in the mystical literature of the Golden Age, which, among other representations, anticipate the exploitation of the oneiric by the *Avant-garde* movements. Our article will attempt to sketch the main lines through which conscience (either deliberately or involuntarily as spontaneous answer to certain circumstances) is capable of suspending conclusion and remaining in doubt, neither affirming nor denying. This process leads to literary manifestations of a phenomenon which, far from extinguishing itself throughout history, represents a solid bridge between pagan thought and that associated with the so-called “existential aesthetic”. The model satisfies an archetype because it emanates from collectivity, innate and unconscious; it is a paradigm able to support a textual system and disregard psyche or, to the contrary, give up language and constitute itself into essence. Such an exercise where the “self” is eradicated results in the beginning of processes of a different nature which are described through a wide semantic field covering its many variations, though often the usage ends up resolving these terms as synonyms. Words such as “abandonment”, “transposition”, “transportation”, “absorption”, “outrage”, “astonishment”, “shock”, “suspension”, “stupefaction”, “rapture”, “derangement”, “fascination”, “disturbance”, and even “alienation” refer us to different sensorial stages. Some of these are transitory, others permanent; some provoked, others involuntary; some unleashing creative clarity, and others hindering all action; states that are contemplative beginning, but also transposed resolution. The great variety of nuisances around the spirit contrasts strongly with just one single antonym, “imperturbable”, in an eloquent lexical decompensation.

Greek *epoché* (ἐποχή), born under the Skeptical School’s cloak as a way of detaching from insoluble problems, was discarded by Aristotle, who believed it impossible for mankind to refrain from judging the world. Saint Augustine, as John Heil pointed out, agreed with the former in that he found it impossible to suspend judgement altogether:

The wise skeptic was one who allowed the outer world to penetrate to the smallest degree his inner world of tranquility. ‘Wisdom’ depended on the suspension of judgement, the skeptic’s most effective method of overcoming external disturbances. Quite naturally this notion was attacked by Augustine (...) As anyone who has tried it must have discov-