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Towards an Inclusive History of Existentialism: Agustini and Cortines as Specters of Malcontent

Abstract: One of the more unfortunate aspects of the critical reception of the Latin American Existentialism continues to be that it has been consistently approached as tributary to Europe. In this essay I analyze the antro-po-philosophical qualities of two Latin American poets associated with Hispanic *Modernismo* and Brazilian *Simbolismo*. My analysis of two poems by the Uruguayan Delmira Agustini and the Brazilian Júlia Cortines emphasizes the lyrical responses to the tragic sense of life, an inquisitiveness neglected by critics, who typically accentuate the aesthetic experimentalism of their work. In the first section of this paper I discuss the ‘Existentialness’ of the literary movements associated with Agustini and Cortines, and I offer a catalogue of Latin American Proto-Existentialist poetry from the late 19th and early 20th century. In the second half of the article I center the discussion on the poetic speaker’s crisis which allows me to tease out pronouncements regarding anguish, pain, God, bad faith, absurdity, and freedom. These poems attest to the early presence of an embryonic Existentialism in Latin America anticipating the French boom of the late 30s and 40s, a contribution overlooked by Existentialism’s historians.

Resumen: A pesar de lo mucho que se ha estudiado el existencialismo, los críticos continúan subestimando el aporte y la presencia de este fenómeno cultural en Latinoamérica. En este ensayo analizamos las cualidades antro-po-filosóficas de dos poetisas asociadas con el modernismo hispano y el simbolismo brasileño. Nuestro estudio de dos poemas de la uruguaya Delmira Agustini y la brasileña Júlia Cortines acentúa como las respuestas líricas al sentimiento trágico de la vida aportan una reflexividad menospreciada por la crítica, los cuales típicamente enfatizan las innovaciones estéticas del trabajo poético de ambas escritoras. En la primera parte de este artículo discutimos las cualidades proto-existencialistas del modernismo hispano y el simbolismo brasileño. Posteriormente ofrecemos un catálogo de poesía proto-existencialista latinoamericana del final del siglo XIX y principios del XX. En la segunda mitad del ensayo nos centramos en un análisis de la crisis de la voz poética, lo cual nos permite recalcar las posturas sobre la

angustia, el dolor, Dios, la mala fe, lo absurdo y la libertad. Estos poemas comprueban la temprana presencia literaria de un existencialismo embrionario en Latinoamérica, anticipándose al Boom francés de los años 30 y 40, una contribución desatendida por los historiadores.

DOI 10.1515/ibero-2014-0024

The persistence of Existentialism seems to have no end. The continued appearance of its motifs and characters in literature, art and cinema attests to the resilience of this cultural phenomenon which has transcended the initial euphoria of the 1940s and 1950s. Simply considering recent academic work on Existentialism corroborates this point. In 2010, Alex Schulman read the explicit Existentialism of the latter seasons of the HBO series *The Sopranos*, while Lori Freshwater mines the work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams for its Existentialist qualities. Michael Witmore, in 2012, treats Existentialism within a Shakespearian context, thus predating the origin narrative of Existentialism, which has traditionally been fixed to the 19th century. In the same year, William L. McBride explains, in part, the tenacity of Existentialism as attributable to its “attention on the concrete human individual and on his or her future possibilities [...] instead of acquiescing in the mold that “they” are attempting to impose” (2012: 259). This focusing on the tangible and immediate preoccupations of the individual, a real-time worldliness, has allowed for its continued relevance, however work on the relationship between Existentialism history and Latin America remains sparse¹.

Well into the 21st century, monograph length studies published by leading academic presses have begun to address this historical void. Recent edited volumes *The Continuum Companion to Existentialism* (2011) and *Situating Existentialism* (2012) target Latin American Existentialism from an inclusive perspective, a new development, since from the onset Latin America's place has been cate-

¹ This fascination is a global development which transcends period, language, and national boundaries. For examples look to the work of the Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman and his *The Seventh Seal* (1957) and *Wild Strawberries* (1957), centered on the protagonist's facing their own mortality, or Harold Ramis' *Groundhog Day* (1993), a comedic take on the inescapable circularity of Existence and the Cohen brothers' *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), which deals with the insufferable weight of anonymity. Also see Visconti's *Lo straniero* (1967), an interpretation of Albert Camus's novel *L'Étranger* (1942), a canonical text of universal Existentialism. In the Latin-American sphere see Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1968) or José Henrique Fonseca's *O homem do ano* (2003). Other 21st century films of interest are Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* (2001) and David O. Russell's *I ♥ Huckabee* (2004), among many others.

gorized as an offshoot of Europe². Nevertheless, *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism* (2012) continues to exclude Hispanic and Latin American writers who belong in the Existentialism canon, an oversight due to a *post hoc* mythology at times perpetrated by our continent's own critics. In fact, this tributary position was promoted by the first wave of Hispanic critics to undertake a study of Existentialism. The work of Manuel Lamana, Francisco Larroyo, and Julio Fausto Fernández, while habitually acknowledging the participation of the Spanish philosophers Miguel de Unamuno and José Ortega y Gasset, regrettably sustained the myth of late Latin American Existentialism³. These studies passed over, almost in unanimity, the contributions of an entire contingency of Latin American philosophers, because of a misplaced notion of *sui generis*, since the first advocates, primarily in Paris, such as Sartre and de Beauvoir, became resolute promoters of Existentialism⁴.

Recently, however, some critics have begun to address the historical discrepancy in terms of Latin-American belatedness, Roberto Domingo Toledo, for one, has asserted that "Existentialism was a generative philosophical current in Latin America before the movement became influential in the United States and Europe" (2011: 215)⁵. Yet as Stephanie Merrim has very insightfully underscored there

2 The studies of existential narratives are extensive when the focus is English language literature and different European literatures. However in the context of Spanish language and Portuguese language literature only the following texts have been produced: Rafael Benítez Claros's *Existencialismo y picaresca* (1958), Gemma Roberts's *Temas existenciales en la novela española de posguerra* (1978), and Óscar Barrero Pérez's *La novela existencial española de posguerra* (1987). With a Latin-American focus we have José Fernandes's *O existencialismo na ficção brasileira* (1986), and the more recent Martin L. Gibas's *Existential angst in Mario Benedetti's Montevideanos* (2004) and Miguel Ángel Náter's *Los demonios de la duda: Teatro existencialista hispanoamericano* (2004). As this inventory illustrates a synchronized reading of Latin- American Existential literature has not been conducted.

3 Julián Marías was one of the ardent supporters of a Spanish Existentialism which pre-dates the French Boom: "Spanish thought in the 20th century has anticipated the majority of discoveries made by philosophers known as Existentialists and, at the same time, has constructed a whole part of its doctrine unknown in other places" (1954: 182).

4 The studies I mention are Julio Fausto Fernández's *El existencialismo: ideología de un mundo en crisis* (1950), Francisco Larroyo's *El existencialismo: sus fuentes y direcciones* (1951) and Manuel Lamana's *Existencialismo y literatura* (1967). These studies overlooked the humanist thought of the 1930s, such as Francisco Romero's *Filosofía de la persona* (1935), Carlos Astrada's *El juego existencial* (1933), *Idealismo fenomenológico y metafísica existencial* (1936) and Alejandro Korn's *Apuntes filosóficos* (1935). They also ignored Carlos Vaz Ferreira's *Fermentario* (1938), Moisés Vincenzi's *El hombre máquina* (1938) and Alberto Lamar Schwyer's *Las rutas paralelas* (1922), among others.

5 For Domingo Toledo this is due in no small part to the necessary reflection on ethnic and cultural identity from a national and individual perspective.

persists an absence of a synchronistic and panoramic study on the subject. Merrim has offered a displacement theory for this oversight, explaining that “[D]islocated by magical realism, the Boom, and the politicized post-Boom, Existentialist fiction appears largely to have been edged off the curricular and scholarly map” (2011: 95)⁶.

The aforementioned studies have constantly attributed the foundational narratives of Existentialism to Dostoevski or Kafka, and of course, the French connection comprised of Sartre, Camus and de Beauvoir⁷. Additionally, most historians point to the 19th century when delineating the origins of Existentialism in the 20th with special attention given to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and the aforementioned Dostoevski. However, a similar retrospective look at the late 19th and early 20th century in Latin America, in particular Hispanic American *modernismo* and its Brazilian contemporary *simbolismo*, finds a common ideological space in terms of a Proto-Existentialist moment. It is my position that insufficient attention has been given to this revolutionary era in Latin America with regards to the Existentialism canon. This omission is more puzzling since these two movements shared many of the critical, skeptical positions common of the forbearers of Existentialism.

Given this critical inaccuracy and the contemporariness of Existentialism, my main focus in this study is to begin to synchronize the origins of Existentialism in Latin America to the decades preceding the French Boom of the 1940s. To this end, and because of the summary scope of this study, I will date Latin American contributions via poetry, making use of two poets which have never appeared in the history of Existentialism. I will be discussing the more celebrated and infamous Delmira Agustini’s “Lo ineffable” (1910) and the all but forgotten Júlia Cortines’s “Por toda a parte” (1905)⁸. The two poems function as a synecdoche of

⁶ Merrim continues to explain that “Naturally, we teach Existentialism’s canonical authors, no doubt in spades, but do we teach them under the auspices of Existentialism? Or have their works been absorbed into the rubrics just mentioned or into feminism, identity politics, or politics? Symptomatic of the disregard and contributing to it is the lack of overarching scholarship on Latin American Existentialist fiction” (2011: 95–96).

⁷ The critical oversight has been consistent, starting at least with Walter Kaufmann’s *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (1956), William Barrett’s *Irrational Man* (1958), and Gordon Marino’s *Basic Writings of Existentialism* (2004).

⁸ The shocking death of Delmira Agustini has been well documented by her biographers. Júlia Cortines’s obscurity is puzzling given the quality of her poems. Gilberto Araújo, in the most recent edition of Cortines’s work, explains that in part this consignment to anonymity was the work of the Brazilian avant-gardist of the 1920s to disassociate themselves from their literary past, as opposed to symptom of poor literary quality of Cortines’s work: “à hospitalidade pretérita sucedeu o gradual esquecimento de Júlia Cortines, sequestro circunscrito ao descaso geral com o par-

presence because as representatives of both movements, these poems denote a larger preoccupation with individuality, subjectivity, finitude, freedom and nothingness which permeate the literary production of *modernismo* and *simbolismo*. From this perspective, the Existentialist qualities found in Cortines and Agustini add to the mounting scholarship of our literary Modernity which goes beyond the overemphasis on formal and linguistic fastidiousness underscored by the first critics.

***Existentialness* and Latin American Literary Modernity**

Conventionally, Existentialism, regardless of form, is an ode to nothingness, a feverish awakening or suspicion to the constructiveness of human Existence. All major Existentialist thinkers, from Kierkegaard to Unamuno through to the Brazilian Raimundo de Farias Brito, have at one time or another and in varying degrees, dealt with the problematic of this all-consuming freedom⁹. Eduardo Mendieta, in the previously mentioned *Situating Existentialism*, offers an insightful take on the analogous relationship between Existentialism and Modernity, because as he explains “it is the quintessential philosophy of modernity. At the center of all existentialist thinking is the inescapably free subject who must make herself in a world bereft of meaning” (2012: 181). Both Agustini and Cortines address this very point, they struggle with securing meaning, that is, understanding of their inquietude. Likewise, the meaninglessness of their Existence connotes a signifying void, not the justification for decadent despair and catatonia. Quite the opposite effect is palpable in the writing of Agustini and Cortines, since Existence is wanting of meaning; they pursue that significance fanatically in their writing¹⁰.

nasianismo: na batalha modernista, o Parnaso serviu de bode expiatório, sendo sacrificado no século XIX por pecados inventados no XX” (Cortines, 2010: VIII–IX). For Araújo, Cortines is both a *simbolista* and a *parnasiana*.

⁹ In *O mundo interior* (1914), Farias Brito expresses this central concern of Existentialism: “O nada-eis, pois, o fim e a verdade definitiva para a vida. Além disto viver é sofrer e prolongar a vida seria tornar eterno o sofrimento. Pode dizer-se que a vida é uma agonia contínua; e o momento em que começamos a viver é já, por assim dizer um começo de morte [...] Para vencer, pois, o desespero e a desgraça irremediável da vida, só há um meio: o completo esquecimento de tudo no nada. O nada-eis, pois, a suprema liberação” (37).

¹⁰ Demetrio Estébanez Calderón defines Existentialism as “movimiento filosófico que se desarrolla en Europa durante el periodo de entreguerras (1918–1939) y en la etapa inmediatamente

Following this trend of thought, our literary Modernity of the late 19th and early 20th century, an era commonly understood as the first literary revolution of Latin American letters, is chock-full with what *a posteriori* will be understood as Existential themes and positions. A review of the ideology which energized this literary renovation evidences that “Existentialness”. For example, while referring specifically to Hispanic *modernismo*, Alejandro Mejías-López explains exactly what was so modern, and in my understanding Existential, about this generation: “they were the first to theorize not just Hispanic, but “Western” modernism and the problematic relationship of literature and art to the changing environment brought about by modernization” (2009: 4). The literary treatment of Modernity, with all the esthetic and ethical identity questioning that entailed is also present in *simbolismo*, and manifests itself, many times in self-consciousness and a sense of cultural disassociation.

The two introspective poets I will discuss fit perfectly into the intense skepticism, cynicism and overall humanist concerns common of the more ethically preoccupied writers of *modernismo* and *simbolismo*, such as José Martí, José Enrique Rodó, or João Cruz e Souza¹¹. These writings are also associable with the canonical literatures of Existentialism because of the obvious discontent centered squarely on the questioning of Existence and humanity’s meaning in it. These attitudes of *modernismo* and *simbolismo*, which expose the critical anachronism of Latin American Existentialism, are ignored by the historians of Existentialism, an inaccuracy principally based on the presumed über-estheticism of both.

We can continue to appreciate each movement’s “Existentialness” by referring to the critical reception of the closing decades of the 20th century, which sheds light on the larger philosophical agendas of many of these writers. For example, Ivan A. Schulman explains that *modernismo* represented “un período de hondos buceos en todas las esferas del saber humano, una época de productivos experimentos, de brillantes hallazgos y de fervorosa actividad literaria e intelectual” (1987: 14). For his part, Alfredo Bosi characterizes *simbolismo* as a similarly inquisitive movement which aspired to build upon the aesthetic quality of art to “ir além do empírico e tocar, com a sonda da poesia, um fundo comum que susteria os fenômenos, chame-se Natureza, Absoluto, Deus ou Nada” (1984: 295). Clearly these critics, along with many others who have revitalized the understanding of *modernismo* and *simbolismo*, emphasize the struggles with conscientious-

posterior a la Segunda Guerra Mundial,” which emphasized “la primacía del individuo concreto frente a lo universal, y de la existencia frente a la esencia” (2004: 179–180).

¹¹ See for example the cultural apologist writings of Martí and Rodó, such as *Nuestra América* (1891) and *Ariel* (1900), respectively. Also of ethical interest are the abolitionist writings of Cruz e Souza.

ness of both movements which have traditionally been celebrated as primarily esthetical.

Indeed, if we read both the positions of Schulman and Bosi as illustrative of the multidimensionality of our literary Modernity, it becomes immediately apparent that the common denominator between *modernismo* and *simbolismo*, in terms of their Existentialness, becomes the sociocultural dissatisfaction commonly referred to by experts as the *fin de siglo* crisis, a discontented zeitgeist, not exclusive to Europe or to the 20th century. Given all of the above, that is, the ethical undertones highlighted by the critics of *modernismo* and *simbolismo*, and the chronological proximity with the early phase of universal Existentialism, the lack of a synchronized Latin American Existentialism becomes all the more puzzling.

Existentialist Voices

As previously cited, Merrim has pointed to a need for an overarching comparative study on Existentialism in Latin America; however, individualized case-studies exist and typically begin with Rubén Darío's "Lo fatal" (1905) when the focus is poetry. According to Concepción Núñez Rey, the Nicaraguan's poem "anticipa y sintetiza el pensamiento existencialista que ha impregnado la literatura del siglo XX" (2004: 12)¹². However, upon closer examination of the lyrical production of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, we find an abundance of poetry which is introspective in character and which predates Darío's work from 1905. One concrete example, convincingly documented by Francisco Peña Bermejo, is the Galician romanticist Rosalía de Castro's *En las orillas del Sar* (1884), which for Peña Bermejo marks a new philo-poetic attitude intimately associable with Existentialism¹³. Like Rosalía and Darío, these other writers focused on the individual and his/her immediacy, that is to say the human condition in its most instantaneous state. Symptomatically these Proto-Existentialists poeticize the weight of uncertainty which permeates their Existence, often expressing itself as a struggle for self-understanding. Time and again, throughout many of these poems, and in particular the two I will directly comment on, the poetic voice deals with the despair of not knowing, while struggling for relevance, and a quantum of authen-

¹² See Peña Bermejo's *Poesía existencial española del siglo XX* (1993) and César Fernández-Moreno's "Para América Latina: Una poesía existencial" (1983), which have similar historical positions.

¹³ See Peña Bermejo's "El talento existencial de Rosalía de Castro" (1996).

ticity, a conscious tension found later in much of the work of Unamuno, Camus and Sartre¹⁴.

Exhibits of this embryonic Existentialism abound throughout Latin America. For example we have *modernismo*'s Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera and his poems "To be" (1886), "Monólogo del incrédulo" (1887) and "Pax animae" (1890); Julián del Casal's own "Pax animae" (1892), "La mayor tristeza" (1893), "Desolación" (1893); and José Asunción Silva's "Filosofías" (1896)¹⁵. From Brazil's analogous *simbolismo*, Raimundo Correia and his sarcastically titled collection *Aleluias* (1891) and in particular his poems "VIVER! EU SEI QUE A ALMA CHORA", "HOMEM, EMBORA EXASPERADO BRADES", "Imagem da dor", "Vana", "Meditações", "Desiludido", and from his *Poesias* (1898) "NADA! ESTA SÓ PALAVRA EM SI RESUME TUDO"¹⁶.

The transitional years between 1910 to 1919 also have noteworthy Proto-Existentialist voices in Hispanic America, such as Amado Nervo's "Yo no nací para reír" (1914) and "Al cruzar los caminos" (1919), and from Brazil Augusto dos Anjos's haunting *Eu* (1912) and his poems "Monólogo de uma sombra", and "Eterna Mágoa", "Natureza íntima"¹⁷. Looking further ahead and focusing less on the formal and thematic experimentalism of the *vanguardia histórica*, meaning from 1914 to 1936, we can tease out the pronouncements regarding bad faith, freedom, authenticity and death in César Vallejo's poem "LXXV" in *Trilce* (1922) and Rafael García Bárceña's forgotten collection *Sed* (1936) and his poems "Estética", "Indagación" and "Ser". During this same period, the history of Existentialism has given limited attention to Pablo Neruda's "Walking Around" in *Residencia en la tierra* (1935), among others¹⁸.

As this inventory demonstrates, the poetry of Agustini and Cortines is not indicative of an eccentric or dissociative singularity. Rather these two poets form part of a larger Latin-American Existentialism *avant la lettre*¹⁹. Agustini's poetry,

14 For example see Unamuno's *San Manuel Bueno, mártir* (1930), Sartre's *La Nausée* (1938) and Camus's *L'Étranger* (1942).

15 Also worth mentioning: del Casal's "Nihilismo", Silva's "Mal de siglo", Juana Borrero's "Íntima," Amado Nervo's poems "XI" and "XXVIII" from *Perlas negras* (1898) and Gutiérrez Nájera's "Las almas huérfanas" (1890).

16 The capitalization of the titles is Correia's.

17 From this transitional era see Nervo's "Miedo", "Inmortalidad", "Mentor muerto", "De todo mi pasado" and "Arcanidad" in *Serenidad* (1914). Also see Vallejo's "Los heraldos negros" (1918). From the historical *vanguardia* era see María Vaz Ferreira's "Los desterrados" in *La isla de los cánticos* (1925).

18 Also see from the post-*vanguardia* era Vallejo's poem IX in *España, aparta de mí este cáliz* (1937) and "Voy a hablar de la esperanza" in *Poemas humanos* (1939).

19 See Edwin Murillo's "Existentialism *avant la lettre*: The Case of Enrique Labrador Ruiz's *El laberinto de sí mismo*" (2011) where I discuss this topic from a narrative perspective.

largely seen as oscillating between the decadent and the sadomasochistic, belongs to the literary history of Existentialism because in her work we corroborate a preoccupation with pain, human decay, and with time and its emotional weight on the individual. This is richly expressed in “Lo ineffable”, a poem which in fact has three known versions²⁰. The following variant is the most traditional representation of Agustini’s work and the title perfectly symbolizes the ideological tension which sustains the relationship between the Existent and Existing:

Yo muero extrañamente...No me mata la Vida,
No me mata la Muerte, no me mata el Amor;
Muero de un pensamiento mudo como una herida...
¿No habéis sentido nunca el extraño dolor

De un pensamiento inmenso que se arraiga en la vida,
Devorando alma y carne, y no alcanza a dar flor?
¿Nunca llevasteis dentro una estrella dormida
Que os abrasaba enteros y no daba un fulgor? ...

Cumbre de los Martirios! ...Llevar eternamente,
Desgarradora y árida, la trágica simiente
Clavada en las entrañas como un diente feroz! ...

Pero arrancarla un día en una flor que abriera
Milagrosa, inviolable! ...Ah, más grande no fuera
Tener entre las manos la cabeza de Dios!
(*Poesías completas*, Versión III, vv. 1–14)

As a whole, the poem conveys a central tenet of universal Existentialism: that which is unknowable, the longing for understanding what by principle cannot be grasped is a foundational contradiction which sustains the sentient Being’s anguish²¹. This poem, structured as a sonnet, projects a tone of lament not fatalism. What cannot be overlooked is that the culprit is not the typical sentimental longing; the poetic voice is explicit in that her pain is not Life, Death or Love. In fact, the poetic speaker recognizes her own contemplativeness as the antagonist and galvanizer for her malaise which becomes all consuming. As the lyrical voice twice confesses, she is haunted by “un pensamiento” (III, v. 5), and that thought projects psychosomatically, as is overt in the first two versions of the poem: “Yo rugiente, anhelante, los dientes apretados,/ De los nervios, del pecho, con los

²⁰ All three versions of the poem are found in *Poesías completas* (1993) edited by Magdalena García Pinto.

²¹ For example see Unamuno’s *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* (1912) and his poems “Salmos” (1909).

dedos crispados,/ Quiero, quiero arrancarlo y la angustia es atroz” (*Poesías completas*, Versiones I and II, vv. 10–12). This stanza, which did not survive Agustini’s last editing process, articulates that her overpowering malcontent has metastasized to every facet of her Existence, from the emotional to the physical (i.e. “anhelante” → “pecho”); however, her will to remedy equals her anguish, as the speaker repeats ‘quiero, quiero arrancarlo’ (I and II, v. 12).

Correspondingly, the poem equates cognizant human Existence and pain, associating self-awareness to martyrdom, which will be carried ‘eternamente’ (III, v. 9). In so doing, the lyrical voice connotes the burden of consciousness and the impossibility of its undoing. Furthermore, the abrasive lexical component of the poem, in particular the usage of “devorando” (III, v. 6), “abrasaba” (III, v. 8), “desgarradora” (III, v. 10), “trágica” (III, v. 10) and “clavada” (III, v. 11), signifies the expansiveness and the intrinsic quality of her anguish and also functions as an expressionist treatment to convey the dangers of self-awareness.

The poem closes by engaging another indisputable leitmotif of Existentialism, one problematized by nearly every writer associated with this philosophical attitude: the elusiveness of God. The poem accomplishes this by equating the potential end of her torment, symbolically understanding the indefinable thoughts which dominate her every moment, with grasping “la cabeza de Dios” (III, v. 14). By coupling the ineffable to God, Agustini is articulating the triumph of the impossible and the tyranny of nothingness since as with the idea of God, attempting to fully understand and conquer her enigmatic pain is a sadistic exercise of Being, or to put it differently, Agustini is caught in an Existential stalemate.

In only fourteen verses, Agustini achieves the confluence of central problems of Existentialism proper, namely, the danger of intellectualizing Existence and pain as an eternal certainty of life. Additionally, Agustini returns to and underscores the aloofness of the idea of God, a symptomatic Existentialist position when we consider Nietzsche had been propagating the death of God, only a few years before and Unamuno would struggle with the silences he encountered throughout his life, never convincingly proofing the existence or the demise of God²².

Another important voice, never before mentioned in an Existentialist context, is that of Júlia Cortines, who is unremittingly enthralled by shocking imagery, and completely engaged by the decomposition of morality, the chaos of the cosmos and the visceral sense of life. Chief amongst her poetic devices is the lyrical persona which constantly appears as “Eu” and the implied “Você” as both

²² See Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883) and *The Gay Science* (1887) for the Prussian’s idea on the symbolic demise of God. Also see Unamuno’s *San Manuel Bueno, mártir*, where the protagonist is also caught in this Existential stalemate.

spectator and participant. This introspectiveness is apparent in her poem “Por toda a parte”:

Interrogaste a vida interrogaste o arcano
 Misterioso sentir do coração humano
 À nesta palidez serena do luar
 O murmúrio plangente e soturno do mar
 O réptil que rasteja o pássaro que voa
 A fera cujo berro as solidões atroa
 A desenfreada fúria insana do tufão
 A planta a se estorcer numa atroz convulsão
 Interrogaste enfim tudo o que existe tudo
 O que chora o que vibra o que é imoto o que é mudo
 Do astro eterno baixaste à transitória flor
 Que encontraste afinal?
 -A dor! a dor! a dor! (*Versos; Vibrações*, vv. 1–13)

As the title suggests, the poem is of a highly meditative and inquisitive quality, and as is unmistakable with only one reading, no proverbial stone has been left unturned by the poetic voice’s penetrating examination of herself and her surroundings. Cortines’s poem, an Existential soliloquy, is saturated by symbolic counter positions and paradoxes. These juxtapositions, sustained by rhymed couplets, bear witness to the lyrical voice’s disintegration because of the extensiveness of her self-interrogations. This intellectual journey makes use of bold and emotive language in order to transmit the sense that perception and her immediacy dictate her understanding. The couplets also link the transcendental to the elemental (e.g. from “o arcano” [v. 1] and the metaphoric “coração humano” [v. 2]). The symbols used in verses five to eight, which move from the earthly to the heavens and back again, function to epitomize the exhaustiveness of the poetic voice’s journey for self-realization and contentment. To this end, the adjectives employed signify the intensity of the philo-poetic voyage; hence the reader is exposed to the “fúria insana”; (v. 7) and the “atroz convulsão” (v. 8) of searching out the meaning of Existence, which the poetic speaker explicitly is undertaking from the onset of the poem.

The compendiousness of the poem, an all-inclusive Existential odyssey for answers, continues in verse nine when the poetic voice summarizes the extent of her questioning: “interrogaste enfim tudo” (v. 9). What the confessional, incessant tone of the poem finds after much deliberation is that invariably pain endures. For the poetic speaker, perceptive Being, which has been spurred by an ineffable “sentir” (v. 2), culminates with this incontrovertible tenet of Existentialism, which Cortines posits as a question: “Que encontraste afinal? / -A dor! a dor! a dor!” (vv. 12–13). Much like Agustini and Unamuno would assert in later years,

sentient Existence is pain and pain is one of the only certainties of Existence and in turn Being²³. The virtue of this short poem is that Cortines has succinctly poetized the dangers of consciousness, that is to say questioning and knowing as a precarious endeavor, both blessing and curse. By employing symbols to denote all manner of *existable* space, from the abstract to the concrete, from the emotional to the elemental, the affirmation of the triumph of pain has been literally meticulous, and figuratively exhaustive and exhausting.

Revisiting Existentialist History

Certainly, the two poems commented here are only small samples of both poets' Proto-Existentialist qualities. As early as 1903, Agustini was dealing with questions of authenticity, expressing a need for self-understanding and poetizing the virtues of life in general, especially in poems such as "Monóstrofe", "Al vuelo", "La musa gris", "Átomos", y "Diario Espiritual" to name only these from her earliest publications in literary magazines in Montevideo and collections such as *El libro blanco* (1907), *Los cantos de la mañana* (1910) and *Los cálices vacíos* (1913)²⁴. The same holds true for Cortines, whose most interesting Existentialist incursions are "Soledade", "Entre abysmos", "Via Dolorosa", "O tempo", "Renuncia", "A beira do abysmo", "Eu estou fatigada" and "Última Página", from her *Versos* (1894) and *Vibrações* (1905). In both poets, the precocious appearance and continuous interest in the question of Being and the voracious inquisitiveness with regards to Existence, yield poetic testimonials which not only show them as precursors for 20th century Existentialism but which demand inclusion in a canon where they are noticeably absent.

The shared dissatisfaction with literary and ideological status quo unites the innovators of poetry in Latin America. Referring to *modernismo*, Aníbal González has explained that "*Modernismo's* modernity resides in its embrace of the modern tradition of deep, often revolutionary philosophical criticism" (2007: 6). This far-reaching dogmatic reevaluation, manifest as a constant searching and an explicit discontent, is self-evident in the two poems presented here, but is also prevalent in the other poets mentioned earlier, all of which shared an aesthetically and ethically disruptive viewpoint.

²³ See Unamunos' aforementioned *Sentimiento*. Among the Existentialist certainties which most writers agree upon are the inevitability of death, humanity's freedom and the prevalence of Existence over Essence.

²⁴ Agustini's first poems appeared in the literary magazine *La Alborada*. Other poems of Existential quality are "Viene", "La barca milagrosa", "Ceguera" and "¡Oh tú!".

The poets assembled in this essay offer case studies in reflectiveness and contemplativeness from a vigorous ethical perspective, far removed from the purely speculative artist stereotype erroneously associated with *modernismo* and *simbolismo* in the past. The poetic voices confront the contradictions of life, and explore the deep seeded inquietude which plagues their Existence. In the end, as commentaries on the sense and/or senselessness of life, they imply that Existence is enigmatic, concomitant, agonizing and ultimately cruel and solitary. Other women writers, following in the footsteps of Agustini and Cortines, take up similar anthropocentric perspectives on Existence, dealing with repressive norms which they find lacking as projects of Being, as is the case of María Vaz Ferreira, María Luisa Bombal, Clarice Lispector and Yolanda Oreamuno, all writers missing from most of the histories of Existentialism.

I have purposefully concentrated on women writers in the present study because as a whole their contributions have been the most impacted by the critical myopia of the historians of Existentialism²⁵. These same historians would be well-served to take note of how Agustini and Cortines as poetic commentators disquieted and haunted by their own inquisitiveness fit perfectly into the earliest stages of Existentialism. Furthermore, as I have shown, the late 19th century and early 20th was a thriving moment of literary Modernity in Latin America, where certain writers intellectualize their Existence from a malcontent position. This discontent manifested into poetic and narrative voices, some of which became icons of the 20th century, and in Latin America proliferated into the likes of Bombal's Ana María, Lispector's Joana and Oreamuno's Teresa, and many others²⁶.

Ultimately, these poems help to dispute our presence outside the margins of the Existentialist canon, particularly when we collectivize the scope of material which has yet to be read from an Existentialism perspective. The latest work by Domingo Toledo and Mendieta foreshadows a promising future, but much is left to be done to synchronize the contributions of Latin American Existentialism. Given the resilience of universal Existentialism, that is to say its continued

25 The obvious exception is de Beauvoir. See Michèle Le Doeuff's "Simone de Beauvoir and Existentialism" (1980) and Joseph Mahon's "Existentialism, Feminism and Simone de Beauvoir" (1993), among many others. In Latin America, the scope is much smaller, see Lucia Guerra Cunningham's *La narrativa de María Luisa Bombal: una vision de la existencia femenina* (1980) and Barbara Mathie's "Feminism, Language or Existentialism: The Search for the Self in the Works of Clarice Lispector" (1991).

26 The list of characters can continue *ad nauseum*: prior to the period focused on here we have Dostoevski's Underground Man, concurrently we have Asunción Silva's José Fernández or Manuel Díaz Rodríguez's Alberto Soria. Subsequent to the *modernismo/simbolismo* era, Kafka's Gregor Samsa, Sartre's Pablo Ibibieta and Antoine Roquentin, Juan Carlos Onetti's Eladio Linacero, Graciliano Ramos's Luis da Silva, Camus's Meursault, and Ernesto Sábato's Juan Pablo Castel.

presence well into the 21st century, and the ethical/esthetic malaise of the modernizers of Latin American literature, the 19th century seems as good an era as any to begin with this much needed historiography²⁷.

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²⁷ I am grateful to the Institute for the Arts and Humanities at Penn State University for generously funding my research trip to the University of Florida in July 2012. This study is part of a larger manuscript project on the history of Latin American Existentialism.