

## CHAPTER 2 I

*The Early Avant-Garde in Spain**Xon de Ros*

The viaduct mentioned in Borges's poetic homage to Rafael Cansinos Assens, written on the eve of his return to America and published in Buenos Aires in 1924 (see *Textos recobrados 1919–1929*, 52–53) is an early example of the architectural structures – library, labyrinth, tower – used by Borges to conjure up and explore other dimensions, whether cultural, psychological, or metaphysical. Cansinos, who had been Borges's mentor during the months he spent in Madrid in 1920, was known among his contemporaries as 'the poet of the viaduct' not only because he lived close by the Segovia viaduct in Madrid but also because in his writings the site acquired an iconic status as the scenario for bohemian revellers returning home from their nocturnal gatherings in Café Colonial, the literary *tertulia* presided over by Cansinos himself. The 130 m-tall iron bridge inaugurated in 1874 was a landmark of modern technology and engineering, and had become emblematic of the first wave of avant-gardism in Spain. In the words of Juan Manuel Bonet, it was 'a distinctive symbol of Madrid Ultraism, a modest, more pedestrian version of what the Eiffel Tower represented for the Parisian avant-garde'.<sup>1</sup> In Cansinos's memoirs, the account of his first meeting with Borges in Café Colonial appears under the heading 'Blue Viaduct',<sup>2</sup> and Norah Borges's woodcut depicting the viaduct appeared on the cover of one of the issues of the magazine *Grecia*, a flagship of Ultraism, edited since 1920 by Cansinos. The latter's identification with the viaduct is underscored in his own spoof novel about the avant-garde scene in Madrid, *El Movimiento V.P.* (1921), where it is given prominence by its association with his fictional alter ego, the Poet of the Thousand Years, and becomes the setting for the novel's most lyrical passages.<sup>3</sup>

Later on, Borges would reminisce on the convivial atmosphere of the *tertulias*, and also about the squabbles between them, as one of the highlights of his time in Spain, whose cultural life had been invigorated with the arrival of foreign artists and writers taking shelter in the

neutrality of Spain from the ravages of the European War.<sup>4</sup> Among them, the Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro, whose aesthetics of *creacionismo*, seminal for the emergence of the Ultraist movement, were introduced with the publication of Cansinos's translations of a number of poems from *Horizon Carré* in 1918.<sup>5</sup> Later in the same year, *Grecia* had featured a series of poems by Cansinos, under the pseudonym of Juan Las, with the heading: 'Poems of Ultra'. Among them there is one entitled 'The Still and Avid Viaduct' in which the poet adopts the aerial perspective and expansive vision favoured by *ultraísmo*. At the same time, the poem's Icarian allusions ('Airborne bridge / shaking like a body / jumping sideways') recall the reputation of Madrid's viaduct as a favourite spot for suicides. This notoriety is also recorded in Ramón del Valle-Inclán's *Luces de Bohemia*, when Max Estrella invites Don Latino to jump with him from the bridge. Later on, after a dismissive outburst – 'the Ultraists are fraudsters' – the protagonist formulates his own alternative 'dehumanized' aesthetics of the *esperpento*, informed by a social and political agenda. He links this aesthetic with a national tradition of the grotesque which resonates with German expressionism. Valle's conception of a radical poetics energized by a concern with ethical, moral, and social transformation is closely akin to Borges's artistic ideology at the time he visited Spain, as reflected in the commentary to his own translations of German Expressionist poets. This aspiration for both aesthetic and social renewal sets Borges's own early poems apart from the more radical experiments of the first wave of avant-gardism in Spain, even if his translations as well as most of his own poems written in Spain, conform to the unpunctuated free verse characteristic of Ultraist poetry, and include avant-garde lexical signposts such as 'helix', 'plane', 'trolley', or 'isochronous', as well as the word 'viaduct' in two of his poems on the theme of the war.

If anyone among his contemporaries can be associated with the Expressionist style that Borges characterizes as 'Dostoyevskian, utopian, mystical, and maximalist', it should be Ramón del Valle-Inclán, whose chronicles from the French trenches were published in book form late in 1917.<sup>6</sup> Apart from the subject of the European war, traces of Expressionist influence detected in Borges's early poems – instances of an anthropomorphic nature, religious imagery, and sudden blasts of violence – can equally apply to Valle's prose. Even the phrasing is in places redolent of Valle's.<sup>7</sup> A gruesome passage, in Valle's account, of the soldiers' corpses being washed out to sea reappears in one of Borges's poems ('Russia') in a more restrained manner, the image swiftly covered by a reference to the burial fields of Europe.

It is yet more tempting to see in Borges's valedictory poem 'A Rafael Cansinos Assens' an echo of the two main characters' perambulations through old Madrid in *Luces de Bohemia*: the blind modern poet Max Estrella and his rogue agent and companion Don Latino de Hispalis. In all likelihood Borges would have been acquainted with the play that had been serialized in the weekly review *España* from July to October of 1920 and shares with Borges's poem not just the nocturnal setting but also the elegiac mood. Borges's inherited eyesight problems and his youthful leanings towards revolutionary socialism can easily be projected on to the character of Max Estrella, and it is not hard to recognize the avuncular figure of the learned Cansinos, born in Seville, encoded in the name of Don Latino de Hispalis (the Latin name for Seville), a translator well acquainted with the literary scene, who displays a knowledge of the Kabbalah and esoterism. Cansinos was a prolific translator, his sources ranging from Dostoyevsky and Goethe to the Koran, the Talmud, and *Arabian Nights* – the latter highly commended by Borges. His philo-Semitism – he had converted to Judaism and published extensively on the subject – became a bond of kinship between the two that would be celebrated in a sonnet Borges dedicated to him, included in the collection *The Other, The Same* (1964). Cansinos was also a polymath generous with his knowledge, and there is gratitude and affection in Borges's memories as he declares that on saying goodbye to Cansinos he felt he was leaving behind all the libraries in Europe with all the knowledge held in them.<sup>8</sup>

For Borges, this image of Cansinos as a heterodox, iconoclastic, and erudite figure would soon supersede his role as the spearhead of *ultraísmo*. This view was not only a reflection of his own gradual estrangement from the movement but also an appraisal of Cansinos's contradictory stance, which is summed up by Gerardo Diego in his obituary: 'Because of the appreciation and gratitude we felt towards Cansinos – that Sevillian *maestro* –, it took us, the avant-gardists, a long time to realize that he did not have much faith in the new art. Deep down, Cansinos was a *modernista* and that explains why he has received so much attention from American poets, whereas in Spain he was soon, and unjustly, forgotten.'<sup>9</sup> Cansinos's reluctance to subscribe to any programmatic aesthetics was conspicuous in the belligerent atmosphere of the avant-garde where defections and allegiances were the subject of much debate among partisans of different tendencies, fostering a proliferation of manifestos and pronouncements. The rift between Huidobro and Guillermo de Torre in 1920 exposed the fissures caused by this indeterminacy and lack of cohesion among the members of the movement. Cansinos's subsequent falling-out with

Guillermo de Torre precipitated the former's abandonment of Ultraism in 1921.<sup>10</sup> In the course of that year, Borges would publish no fewer than six declarations in several literary magazines, showing an increasing preoccupation with defining the principles and norms of Ultraism. The last declaration was published in Buenos Aires in December and contained some examples of Ultraist poetry. However, the presence among those of Gerardo Diego's *creacionista* poem 'Mystical Rose' suggests that Borges was still sympathetic to Cansinos's early call to embrace all new tendencies, even if he felt compelled to qualify what he described as Cansinos's sweeping and cautious definition. This broad scope is reflected in the list of names mentioned by Borges in the text, from practitioners to sympathizers – among the latter Huidobro, and Valle-Inclán, as well as Ramón Gómez de la Serna, José Ortega y Gasset, and Juan Ramón Jiménez.

Unsurprisingly, the sample of poems in Borges's article also includes one of the short Ultraist poems or 'lirogramas' by Juan Las (also known as Cansinos Assens). In the article's final paragraph Borges lambasts the premises of confessional poetry and postulates for the Ultra poet a wandering poetic self in constant process of transformation. This notion, close to T.S. Eliot's theory of depersonalization, has its roots in Walt Whitman, for whom Borges would declare a life-long admiration. His influence was evident in Borges's first published poem 'Hymn to the Sea' which appeared in *Grecia* shortly after his arrival in Spain.<sup>11</sup> It is also present in his poetic homage to Cansinos which was penned just before leaving the country in 1921 and published together with two other poems under the general heading of 'Psalms'. Written in a series of long, self-contained, irregular lines in the manner of Whitman's poetry, the poem also displays instances of Whitmanesque oracular diction that Borges would cultivate in his late poetry. It is also an early example of a 'poetry of the vanishing' that would become one of his trademarks. As Harold Bloom points out, 'Borges sees himself as the celebrator of things in their farewell; his later poetry and stories frequently portray the experience of doing something for the last time, seeing someone or some place as a valediction.'<sup>12</sup>

Formally, the poem's 14 lines inevitably suggest a sonnet, a form that Borges had been practising in both the Shakespearian and the Petrarchan varieties before his visit to Spain.<sup>13</sup> It may seem a strangely conventional choice, as the sonnet, with its architectural conception and *modernista* resonances, was the avant-gardists' *bête-noire*. Predictably, it is the target of a diatribe in Cansinos's novel, where the practitioners of the form, deemed 'the very worst of all future aesthetics', are automatically disqualified from

the avant-garde. Yet, the choice of an unrhymed free version of the traditional Petrarchan sonnet might have been dictated by the poem's subject: a promoter of the avant-garde who, just like his fictional incarnation, finds himself torn between the old and the new.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the two-part division of the sonnet allows for the presentation of a dual identity, anticipating a pattern that Borges would later revisit in his poetry. Also, in a characteristic Borgesian manner, the nocturnal setting of the initial lines echoes the first expeditions of discovery to the viaduct of the Poet of the Thousand Years in the company of his acolytes. The poem's insistence on the collective pronoun 'nosotros' communicates the *esprit de corps* of the early avant-garde incursions before the in-fights and defections that would lead to the disintegration of the movement. The poem's proleptic structure, from past to present, is figured in the linearity of the viaduct which is perched at the end of the initial line that evokes the 'sublime exultation' of walking along the 'wing' of the viaduct. The positioning of the word reflects the idea of the Ultraist image in which, according to Borges's own formulation, the word is not a bridge for ideas but an end in itself.<sup>15</sup>

The concentric anaphoric pattern of the sestet suggests a more introspective voice, with a series of mirror constructions. The parallelism of the next two lines is followed by a set of chiasmic images that closely recall a reference to America within *El movimiento V.P.* where the two hemispheres are contrasted: 'just when people here are about to turn on the lamps, over there they are waking up' (Cansinos, *El movimiento*, 254).<sup>16</sup> In Borges's poem the idea of repetition with a difference conveyed in the chiasmus is further explored in the adverbial anaphora of 'aun/aún' [even/still], two homonyms only distinguished by a graphic accent which provides the word with temporal elasticity. Whereas this play of reflections and repetitions suggests a merging of identities, it also implies a reversal. Cansinos's novel ends with the farewell of the Poet of the Thousand Years, leaving behind his former disciples and taking off for America, seen as a promised land for the new art. Borges's poem, written on the eve of his own departure, playfully assumes for himself the mantle of the Poet of the Thousand Years – a case of life imitating art imitating life, soon to become a familiar trope in his fiction.

In the course of time, Borges would disown his Ultraist origins and all things related to the movement. According to Guillermo de Torre, Borges's enthusiasm for that period – the years from 1919 to 1922 – soon turned into disdain, even animosity ('Para la prehistoria ultraista de Borges', 457). This never applied to Cansinos, for whom Borges continued to profess admiration and affection throughout his life. Moreover, judging

from his correspondence, the time Borges spent in Spain, not only in Madrid, but also in Majorca and Seville, was exciting and stimulating. It was certainly fruitful. The young writer was able to meet and collaborate with some of the major figures of Spain's literary scene, carving out for himself a reputation as a maverick writer. The experience was also seminal in that it allowed him to experiment with techniques and themes that he would develop later in his work. The bustling eclectic atmosphere of the first avant-gardist wave provided him with some lasting friendships, not just Cansinos but also Guillermo de Torre, Vicente Huidobro, and the Majorcan poet Jacobo Sureda, and with a first taste both for the literary life, and, as conveyed in his 'viaduct' poem, for an image of literary selfhood.

### Notes

1. Juan Manuel Bonet, 'Baedeker del Ultraísmo', in Juan Manuel Bonet, ed. *El Ultraísmo y las artes plásticas* (Valencia: IVA and Centre Julio González, 1996), pp. 9–59 (p. 10).
2. Rafael Cansinos Assens, *La Novela de un literato*, 3 vols (Madrid: Alianza, 2005), III, pp. 23–24. The two men were introduced by the poet Pedro Garfias who was an active member of Cansinos's Ultraist cohort and one of the signatories of their first manifesto in 1918; Garfias also introduced Guillermo de Torre who would marry Borges's sister, Norah.
3. Rafael Cansinos Assens, *El Movimiento V.P.* (Madrid: Hiperión, 1978), p. 103.
4. See 'La traducción de un accidente' (1925), in Jorge Luis Borges, *Inquisiciones* (Barcelona: Seix Barral/ Biblioteca Breve, 1994), pp. 17–21; see also in the same volume, 'Definición de Cansinos Assens', pp. 51–55.
5. Cansinos Assens, 'La modernísima poesía francesa (el creacionismo)', *Los Quijotes*, 4, 87 (October 1918).
6. Ramón del Valle-Inclán, *La media noche. Visión estelar de un momento de guerra* (Alicante: Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 2017). Available online at [www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/la-media-noche-vision-estelar-de-un-momento-de-guerra-875777](http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/la-media-noche-vision-estelar-de-un-momento-de-guerra-875777) (accessed 1 October 2018).
7. Some examples are: 'En el cuerno salvaje de un arco iris / clamaremos su gesta' ('Rusia'), and 'el silencio aulla en los horizontes hundidos' ('Trinchera'). For the influence of Expressionism in Borges's early poetry see Thorpe Running, 'Borges's Ultraist Poetry', in Harold Bloom, ed. *Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986).
8. Prologue to Rafael Cansinos Assens, *El candelabro de los siete brazos* (1914), (Madrid: Alianza, 1986), p. 3.
9. Gerardo Diego, 'Cansinos Assens', *Índice de Artes y Letras*, 186 (julio–agosto 1964), p. 15.
10. The estrangement between Cansinos and de Torre might have contributed to Borges's strained relationship with the latter. De Torre is mercilessly parodied

- in *El Movimiento V.P.* as the 'Youngest Poet of All', speaking in neologisms and seemingly afflicted by logorrhea (III, p. 39 and *passim*); see also de Torre's remarks on Cansinos in *Literaturas europeas de vanguardia* (1925) (Sevilla: Renacimiento, 2001), pp. 76–78.
11. Guillermo de Torre refers to this influence as a 'Whitmanesque enthusiasm before the plurality of the universe', in 'Para la prehistoria ultraísta de Borges', *Hispania*, 473 (September 1964), pp. 457–463 (p. 458).
  12. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), p. 443.
  13. The other poem dedicated to Cansinos, 'Rafael Cansinos Assens', *The Other, The Same* (1964), is a Shakespearian sonnet.
  14. In the prologue to his collection *La Moneda de Hierro* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1976) where he reiterates his indebtedness to Cansinos, Borges states that each subject, however occasional or minor requires a specific aesthetics, and, perhaps alluding to the poem discussed here, he claims that the possibilities of the 'Protean' sonnet and Whitmanesque free verse, are not yet exhausted.
  15. 'Al margen de la moderna estética', published in *Grecia* (Sevilla, enero 1920), in *Textos Recobrados 1919–1929*, p. 31.
  16. Cf. Borges's 'A Rafael Cansinos Assens': 'Cuando la tarde sea quietud en mi patio, de tus cuartillas surgirá la mañana. / Será sombra de mi verano tu invierno y tu luz será gloria de mi sombra'.