

WAR-LIKENESS: THE PUGILIST IN FRANCISCO AYALA'S VANGUARDIST NARRATIVES

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Francisco Ayala, writing from Buenos Aires in 1949, and sobered by years of war and exile, dismissed his extravagant writings of the 1920s:

Varias fantasías alimentaron entonces [...estos] relatos deshumanizados, cuya base de experiencia se reducía a cualquier insignificancia, o vista o soñada, desde la que se alzaba la pura ficción en formas de una retórica nueva y rebuscada, cargada de imágenes sensoriales.

¿Quién no recuerda la tónica de aquellos años, aquel impávido afirmar y negar, hacer tabla rasa de todo, con el propósito de construir—en dos patadas, digamos—un mundo nuevo, dinámico y brillante? Se había roto con el pasado, en literatura como en todo lo demás; los jóvenes teníamos la palabra: se nos sugería que la juventud, en sí, y por sí, era ya un mérito, una gloria; se nos invitaba a la insolencia, al disparate gratuito; se tomaban en serio nuestras bromas, se nos quería imitar [...] El balbuceo, la imagen fresca, o bien el jugueteo irresponsable, los ejercicios de agilidad, la eutrapelia, la ocurrencia libre, eran así los valores literarios de más alta cotización. (Proemio 10)¹

Ayala's vanguardist stories, collected in *El boxeador y el ángel* (1929) and *Cazador en el alba* (1930), appear to conform fully with Ortega y Gasset's notion of "dehumanized" art. Plot is reduced to the minimum, characters are flattened and stylized, the stylistic surface shimmers with audacious, showy images, which the mature, worldly-wise Ayala calls "gratuitous nonsense," "babble," and "irresponsible playfulness."²

Thematically, these stories reflect the "tonic of those years"—the vanguardist intoxication with modernity and cosmopolitanism—while making scant references to contemporary historical events: the war in Morocco, labor unrest, a resurgent Catalan nationalism, the military regime of General Primo de Rivera. In Morocco, the devastating and humiliating defeat at Annual in 1921, when Abd el-Krim's rebel forces decimated Spanish troops, had repercussions that would provoke Primo's coup two years later.³ After public outcry over official incompetence in an already unpopular colonial war, the Ministry of War appointed a magistrate to determine who was responsible for the defeat.⁴ However, an indignant military leadership managed to restrict the proceedings such that only a few low-level officers were court-martialed. In an attempt to broaden the investigation, the Cortes formed a "Comisión de Responsabilidades," but those efforts were cut short by Primo de Rivera's coup in September 1923.

Over the next two years, Spanish forces continued to lose ground in Morocco, despite an increased military presence and offers of limited autonomy to the Rifian rebels. The Protectorate was finally pacified in 1927, after a prolonged joint campaign by French and Spanish forces, accompanied by brutal repression.⁵ Meanwhile, on the domestic front, Primo de Rivera's regime suspended the constitution, suppressed Catalan nationalism, and imposed censorship. This "regenerationist dictatorship," however, also oversaw an unprecedented period of modernization. Under its public works program, investment in the highway system, hydroelectric power, public transport, and mass communications—all experienced dramatic growth.⁶ The booming world economy also contributed to significant increases in manufacturing, foreign trade, urbanization, improved public health, and a higher standard of living, although agricultural production stagnated, leaving much of the countryside mired in poverty and backwardness.⁷

These tumultuous events remain well outside the narrative space of Ayala's "dehumanized" stories. Yet the central preoccupation of these texts is modernization, and in this sense they indeed point to their historical circumstance—namely, to that dramatic economic expansion underwritten by the *primorriverista* regime. The narrative action takes place in a dynamic, cosmopolitan cityscape with skyscrapers, neon lights, and teeming crowds. Everything appears in constant flux: the neon lights flash their intermittent messages, shop windows display their garish wares, legions of shoppers pass along the sidewalks, merchandise changes hands, and identities are renegotiated. This dizzying flux, so well captured by Ayala's metaphorically charged prose, nevertheless contains ominous shadows, symptoms of anxiety, hints of wars past and wars to come.⁸ And there amid the "insignificancia[s], vista[s] o soñada[s]" that Ayala projects on the scrim of a spectacular society, readers can detect the faint but unmistakable traces of history (Proemio 10).

Particularly striking is the figure of the pugilist, who emerges in two of Ayala's vanguardist narratives: the novella "Cazador en el alba" and the short story "El boxeador y el ángel." In the decade after the Great War, boxing, as a spectator sport, surged in popularity throughout Europe and the Americas. Prizefighting became, as the historian Jeffrey Sammons has noted, a form of "mock struggle," a "gunless analogue" for war (49, 54): "After the horrors of mustard gas, bombs, mortars, and machine guns, boxing represented a more simple and noble past, with men in control of their destiny"; it fostered "idle dreams about an era in which battles were fought one-on-one and hand-to-hand" (Sammons 49-50, 54). The popularity of the sport can also be understood as a response to a sense of impotence and disembodiment in an age of technological transformation and changing gender roles. In prizefighting,

hand-to-hand combat was subsumed into the society of spectacle and contained within a well-regulated ritual performance.

I. A Soldier in the Society of Spectacle

Ayala's novella, "Cazador en el alba" (1929), traces the transformation of a cavalry soldier, of *campesino* origin, into an urbane citizen and triumphant boxer. While the Moroccan War is never mentioned directly, it nevertheless remains implicitly in the background, as a shadow of recent history, reinforced by constant references to "el soldado Antonio Arenas." Horse cavalry tactics, I might add, figured prominently in the Moroccan War, although they might seem anachronistic alongside tank warfare and aerial bombing.⁹ Both the rugged terrain of the Rif and a stubborn "cult of the bayonet and cavalry charge" ensured the continued relevance of "regimientos de cazadores" [light cavalry troops] in battle (Balfour 160).

In the opening scene, the cavalryman Antonio Arenas, lies semi-conscious in an infirmary after a fall from his horse. He is characterized as a "jinete caído" in the thrall of divine visions, a modern-day Saul on the road to Damascus (64).¹⁰ A stream of images passes through his feverish head like "descabalados trozos de *film*" (62): "Con la cabeza despavorida, inflamada, pueden atarse los vientos tráfugas, las imágenes rotas, las ideas sueltas. Y [. . .] pensamientos sin bridas ni freno arrastraban su cuerpo, estribado por la tierra amarilla, negra, ocre" (62). In his "unbridled" delirium, Antonio feels himself dragged, his foot caught in a stirrup—not along the battlefield, but on the limitless plains of his consciousness. Allusions to the cavalry abound in these early passages, although his fall appears to have occurred not in combat but in training: "La sangre le trotaba en las arterias"; "Patrullaban por sus venas flechillas de 'aire comprimido': ahora lentas, ahora disparadas"; "El sol asediaba la sala [. . .] Lanzaba dardos, introducía espadas por las rendijas, hacía impactos en la pared frontera" (62-63). Indirect references to the colonial wars in Africa arise as well, when Antonio imagines his horse by his side:

[S]u caballo, como el de un beduino herido, acudía a su lado para contemplarle con ojos tiernos de ferocidad ausente. Ligero, triste y dócil como el caballo de un beduino, se había acercado a él, sordas las pisadas en la arena del sueño. Tenía el cuello amplio; la crin, corta; la mirada, cuando no turbia, de Apocalipsis, era una mirada de égloga. En su piel estaba dibujado el caprichoso mapa de Marte—planeta—con canales, continentes e islas nunca vistas.

Antonio se replegó, inhibido. No podrían obligarle a cabalgar, ahora que estaba dormido, que sus miembros eran de plomo y que el Sahara había sido arrasado por la fiebre. (65)

The horse comes to him like the loyal steed of a wounded Bedouin. Sketched on its hide is a map of the planet Mars, named, of course, for the god of war. But Antonio cannot rise and mount the horse, now that he is asleep with “leaden limbs,” and now that the “Sahara” of his own consciousness “has been razed by fever.” By thus subsuming the military experience into Antonio’s “cinematic” consciousness, the narrator sets the stage for Antonio’s eventual subsumption into another image stream—the society of spectacle.¹¹

During the long night, with its “horas elásticas,” the chaotic images gradually cohere into a narrative sequence, as Antonio revisits scenes from “su experiencia castrense” (66). He recalls his first ride on a military train, filled with other raw recruits from the countryside, and in still another reference to cinema, he describes “[d]os cintas de paisaje [que] habían desfilado a derecha e izquierda” (66). When they disembark, he undergoes his medical exam and literal incorporation into the army: “El metro de metal le había hecho sufrir, rodeando su pecho desnudo, el escalofrío de ese explorador centroafricano ahogado por una serpiente” (67). As his measurements are taken, “un enjambre de cifras” buzzes around his head, and a clerk assigns him a new, precise identity: “desde entonces [Antonio] tuvo la noción clara, numérica de su recién adquirida personalidad. Soldado Antonio Arenas, primer regimiento de Cazadores, primera compañía. Perímetro 96; peso, 62; talla, 1,55” (67). Thus ends the first chapter; Antonio has undergone his first metamorphosis—from *campesino* to soldier—and the stage is now set for a more definitive transformation to come.

In chapter two, another military train approaches Madrid and the young soldiers from rural Spain, Antonio among them, catch their first glimpses of the society of spectacle. On the outskirts of the city, what first comes into view is the mass communications network:

Las raicillas más delgadas del mundo industrial, lejos de las urbes, se insertan, ahondan en la carne sana del campo y sensibilizan su volumen neutro. Tensas redes del teléfono, cauterio de la ferrovía, el rastro precario del automóvil en el polvo: todos estos signos que huyen por el campo como liebres, se reúnen y entrecruzan, cerca ya de la gran ciudad para disputarse el terreno. Un gigantesco anillo febril la rodea. Y de él parten los miles de nervios cuyos extremos mueren, capilares, en los rincones ignorados. (67-68)

The cluster of metaphors here—*raicillas*, *nervios*, *capilares*—serves to personify this vast network of telephone and electric lines, likening it to a circulatory system, or a nervous system that expands outward, sensitizing the neutral ground that it colonizes. Closer to the city, verbal signs proliferate, as the recruits intercept the messages, “cada vez más vehementes,” emitted by the city: “Los reclamos de hoteles, de

fotografías, de vinos, de bicicletas, se alzaban sobre los pastos y los puentes” (68). When the train finally enters the station, the soldiers are awe-struck at the spectacle before them:

Los reclutas, caras atónitas, no habían imaginado jamás la posibilidad de una naturaleza entablillada, encorsetada, empaquetada, llena de etiquetas como una mercancía más en los almacenes de la estación.

. . . De pronto, todo quedó inmóvil, parado. (Un *film* que se corta.) (68, ellipsis and emphasis original)

The double reel of film that had streamed across the windows of the suddenly is now broken. For Antonio and the other recruits, the world now appears packaged and tagged like merchandise on display, which in turn defines them as *consumers*. And to consume the urban experience is in turn to be consumed by it, as Antonio will soon learn. Hereafter this cavalryman in the “regimiento de Cazadores,” will hunt the fugitive images of modernity, as he explores an ever mutating cityscape.¹²

Images of metamorphosis abound in a text that can be read as an allegory of Spain’s rapid modernization in the 1920s.¹³ Through a multitude of ingenious metaphors, things proper to traditional rural life transmogrify into objects of modernity. A snake on the roadway becomes, on closer inspection, “un neumático de bicicleta muerto, estrangulado en el borde” (61); chickens become typists, “invisibles gallinas mecanográficas,” who peck at the temples of the bedridden soldier (63); the “manzanas luminosas” that mark the doorway to “un paraíso incógnito” turn out to be the red lights of a brothel (70); and a gramophone with “el niquelado cuello de cisne [comienza] a beber en el disco de acentos norteamericanos” (85). In a particularly audacious chain of metaphors, a dance-hall is reconfigured as a meadow: a pianola becomes a “vaca pródiga en armonías [que] rumiaba, paciente, un rollo de verdes y jugosas notas”; a saxophone is a “gigantesco insecto de níquel [. . .] que chupa la sangre con desesperante lloriqueo a un pobre negro convulso”; and round tables, “[g]randes setas de mármol,” sprout along the edge of the dance floor (72). Such metaphors, all projected through Antonio’s field of vision, illustrate the persistent “nostalgias brotadas del substrato rústico de su alma” (91). He cannot help but seek out “en medio de la ciudad los detalles agrarios que pudieran haberse injerido en ella” (91). Within the logic of the narrative, these metaphorical transformations work to underscore Antonio’s successive metamorphoses: first, from country bumpkin into cavalryman; then, into urbane man of the world; and ultimately, into a prizefighter.

His assimilation into urban spectacle will hinge on his encounter with urban womanhood, which at first appears to him like an “inhumana especie recién salida de los huevos eléctricos que las grandes avenidas incuban” (69). Yet this strange species awakens in him “esa trémula emoción de lo heroico,” as

he begins to shed his past and to feel “renacido en el centro del trajín urbano” (69). Antonio gazes with amazement at the models on billboards, the shop-window mannequins and at the women passing by, dressed in accord with the rectilinear silhouette of nineteen-twenties fashion:

Para un soldado (si procede del campo), las mujeres de la ciudad son un producto industrial, tan perfecto, tan admirable como la máquina de escribir del capitán o la calculadora del comisario. Una maravilla de la técnica moderna: exactas, articuladas.

Ese soldado—campesino de origen—ha contemplado en cualquier escaparate un par de piernas arquetipo; en otro, una pequeña mano enguantada; en otro, una cabeza, un busto... Al mismo tiempo ha visto por la calle todas estas piezas, organizadas, en marcha. Puras formas de mujer, esquemas de mujer. (69-70)

The young soldier from the country-side is flummoxed by the dismembered bodies of shop-window mannequins, when he simultaneously sees these body parts reassembled and in motion, walking along the street. His imagination is incapable of breaking “la armadura del maquillaje,” of dissociating the natural from the artificial, although he does perceive the discrete but insinuating signs of “la realidad vegetal que toda mujer esconde” (70).

Although near at hand, these well-armored urban women appear “tan inaccesibles como las propias deidades del Olimpo” (70). Yet like anyone, “[i]ncluso un campesino en funciones de soldado,” Antonio has the overwhelming desire to break “la luna de un escaparate, arribar a una isla desconocida” (70). He knocks on the door of a brothel and penetrates its “paz conventual” (71). Three young women are brought before him, and like the mythical figure Paris, Antonio must choose among the goods on display in this “Feria de Muestras” (71). He makes an arbitrary source, and the narrator’s camera-eye cuts suddenly to the bedroom:

Una mujer cualquiera, incluso una cualquiera, cuando abandona la posición vertical e imita la de las aguas tranquilas, hace girar a la tierra 90°. El valor de un ángulo recto. Esto es, cambia todas las perspectivas.

Antonio extinguió su experiencia con la voracidad del fuego en el celuloide. Y se encontró otra vez, jinete derribado, caído del cielo, junto a una vertiente de humedad y líquenes.

Mientras, la mujer se evadía, de nuevo nueva. (71-72)

In this comic scene of sexual initiation, we sense the narrator winking and nudging us, as he hints at the 90-degree pivots taking place: for as the prostitute reclines, Antonio’s sexual organ presumably rises (“el valor de un ángulo recto”); then he burns out like film nitrate on fire and once more finds himself a

“jinete caído.” In these “too obvious” metaphors, we might indeed find just cause for Ayala’s embarrassment about his juvenilia. But within the logic of the narrative, the brothel scene represents a key step in Antonio’s metamorphosis.¹⁴ As José M. del Pino has observed, “[l]a visita supondrá su primera ‘penetración’ a un espacio interior de la urbe donde mercancía y artificio se confunden” (161). Upon consuming this sexual merchandise, Antonio is consumed in turn; the scene thus underscores his assimilation into a commercial, spectacular society that is marked, metaphorically, as feminine.

Antonio’s sexual initiation paves the way for a prolonged love affair with a woman he meets in the dance-hall. He enters dressed in full uniform, “brillante de charoles y sonoro de espuelas,” and there he meets Aurora, appropriately named, given that he is the “cazador en el alba” (73). Her status as an allegorical figure becomes immediately clear, signaled by Antonio’s first impression: “Aurora inspiraba un culto especial, impresionante, como si todos la identificasen con la deidad que siempre habían visto representar a la Patria en las alegorías, entre emblemas de las artes y las ciencias” (74). She appears as both an emblem of traditional Iberian womanhood (“Era la mujer ibérica [...] barroca, vegetal, rizada y curva”) and of modern cosmopolitan womanhood; for on her forehead are “seis interrogaciones iguales en forma de rizo”—six spit-curls like those of Betty Boop (74). These question marks designate Aurora as *possibility* in the flesh, bringing not only the possibility of sex and romance, but also of a new “dawn,” or destiny, for Antonio. For on the night he meets her, Antonio also meets her brother, a champion welter-weight boxer, who bears an uncanny, masculinized resemblance to his sister. The brother’s sharp gaze penetrates Antonio’s uniform, taking the measure of the barrel-chested body within, and causing the young soldier to blush in embarrassment and pride. “Tú podrías pelear,” the welter-weight tells him, and the words fall on the marble table “como fichas de domino” (78). Suddenly, Antonio imagines himself in the ring surrounded by a crowd:

Algo cuyo ser ignoraba, pero cuya presencia conocía, se había perfilado en él. Y era un deseo: el deseo de hacer un alarde de fuerza ante la multitud, ya sin rubor. De volcar su alma hercúlea por los puños vendados de los púgiles.

Levantó los ojos y comprendió entonces que la cabeza de Aurora no era sino una copia amanerada de la de su hermano.

Había retrocedido a un lugar secundario.

Al campeón se le licuaba el rostro en sonrisa. Una sonrisa malicio-bondadosa.

—Yo... —comenzaba a decir el soldado. Pero le bastó con ondear la bandera del pronombre personal. La frase quedó deshinchada, en el aire.

Su reciente voluntad de ser (cuando menos, atleta) gritaba como una bandera de pájaros en las ramas de sus nervios.

Frente a él, ella.

Y el otro. Ese otro caído del cielo, nuncio de su destino. (78-79)

In this moment of epiphany, Antonio, discovers a latent desire that points to a heroic destiny: the chance to demonstrate his “Herculean soul”—his brute masculine power—before a multitude, his fists enveloped in a boxer’s hand-wraps. At the same time, the masculine and feminine collapse in the face of Aurora. She suddenly appears to him as a “mannered copy of her brother,” whose face in turn “liquefies” into a smile.

The hunter thus finds a prize worthy of pursuit, or rather, of *purchase*, and he goes on to acquire that desired image of himself. In late spring, once released from the army, he sheds his uniform—“las dermatovértebras de su esqueleto militar”—and now feels himself “ligero, flexible, enriquecido en posibilidades” (88). Walking the sidewalks, he sees advertisements for summer vacation-spots, and in shop windows he observes the summer fashions and *accoutrements* for the beach: “sombreros blancos y zapatillas de paja,” “lánguidos *maillots*,” and “jerseys ligeros” (89). He halts before a store “guarded” by two mannequins in hunters’ attire, a feather in each hat. And just as he had seen his future self in the faces of Aurora and her brother, this modern Narcissus gazes once more at an idealized image that he can purchase and adopt. Feeling an irrepressible desire to complete his transformation, he enters the store:

Entró, por un movimiento en gran parte instintivo. Sentía la necesidad—confusamente—de completar su transformación. Se alejó entre los parapetos de los mostradores, y cuando, un rato más tarde, volvió a trasponer la puerta, los maniqués centinelas no le reconocieron: era otro.

Otro, de raíz. Había abandonado—como serpiente que abandona la piel—su alma rígida, acharolada y metálica, sin recuperar por eso su alma antigua, verde-montaña. (90)

Antonio emerges in fashionable summer attire: a blue shirt, a red belt, a light gray suit, and also wearing “una sonrisa lavable y un gesto reluciente de celuloide” (90). He has cast off his rigid, metallic military soul like a snake sheds its skin. He is now “someone else,” fully absorbed into that film of modern life that he had first seen streaming along the windows when he approached Madrid on the train (90). Military Man has been remade as Modern Man, incorporated into the society of spectacle. If not quite dressed for the hunt, he has become the “hunter in the dawn,” prepared for battle in the ring: “¿Quién le había enseñado esta sonrisa inédita, la misma con que el deportista expresa su confianza ante el peligro?” (90).

The scene cuts to the gymnasium where Antonio trains. At first, the narrator remarks, “el gimnasio había sido para [Antonio] un espectáculo casi tan sorprendente como—meses antes—el Parque zoológico” (92). But soon, with his rippling muscles and formidable skills, “pronto fue él, Antonio, quien constituyó un espectáculo para el gimnasio” (92). Groups of men gather to watch him shadowbox,

formando el público de aquel auto sacramental en que un boxeador combate a su propia sombra, héroe de luchas interiores, tácitas y enconadas. Bajo el arco voltaico, su espalda—tiras de goma, anchos bandajes—hervía, como el mar, de músculos y peces. Doblado, en guardia perfecta ocultaba la cabeza entre los guantes, mazas terribles un momento después hiriendo los cóncavos costados del aire. O bien, giraba en persecución del astuto enemigo, esquivo fantasma tan pronto replegado como dilatado. (92)

While the story has, through the allegorical figure of Aurora, marked the modern city as feminine, and while it has, through the characterizations of Antonio, Aurora, and her brother, suggested a certain fluidity in gender identity, here the text equates hypermodernity with hypermasculinity. Yet fluidity remains in play; for as *spectacle* his brute body has become in a sense *spectral*, translated into abstract, liquid monetary value: “su nombre había comenzado a circular como unas acciones nuevas que se lanzan al mercado, como una divisa con la que podrá jugarse al alza o a la baja” (92).¹⁵ In becoming a spectacle, Antonio not only becomes a “celluloid” hero in a modern success story, but also a hot commodity on the futures market. Speculators will wager on the future performance of that muscle-bound body in the boxing ring. Earlier, in the shop window scene, Antonio had consumed the merchandise on display and emerged wearing new clothes and smiling like a film star. Here he is subsumed into the spectacular domain, fully commodified as a physical specimen endowed with abstract exchange value.

The final chapter, a coda of sorts, appears to confirm Antonio’s metamorphosis: “Su prehistoria había palidecido hasta quedar casi borrada, traslúcida como la luna al mediodía [. . .] Todo su pasado se reducía a signos” (93). His “prehistory,” both rural and military, has almost faded away; there remain only a few “rastros indecisos” that eerily link the past and present, as when the sound of a sewing machine recalls the trotting of a horse (93). Now “[l]o presente, lo inmediato, ocup[a] toda su atención” (93). This immediate present, however, is once again rendered spectacular: “el presente se componía de dos planos cinematográficos: un gran plano con el rostro de Aurora y, a través de él, todo el paisaje en movimiento. Así, Antonio conocía la realidad, diáfana, pero cernida por la persona de Aurora” (93). The reality he now knows consists of a diaphanous film, with a close-up of Aurora—that personification of modernity—superimposed over the cityscape in motion.

In the final scene of the novella, the two lovers sit in a cider house on the outskirts of the city. Antonio falls asleep in Aurora's lap. Suddenly, he awakens: "Había sufrido un repeluzno semejante al de las cuatro treinta de la madrugada. Había sentido en las sienes los dedos fríos de esa hora a que los cazadores suelen apostarse en el alba" (94). The story thus ends enigmatically and ominously. After seemingly embodying the modern success story, this "hunter in the dawn" now awakens to a shiver and feels the grip of cold fingers. Does he awaken in the cider house or in the hospital? Perhaps it has all been a dream. The linear progression towards a triumphant destiny has turned full circle.

This transformation of the cavalry soldier into prizefighter appears on the one hand as a reassertion of a bellicose and bounded masculinity, relocated from the military to the civilian domain. But on the other hand, the ambiguous (and rather clichéd) ending casts doubt on the "substance" of that transformation; for his triumph may have been only a fantasy spun from the feverish brain of a (perhaps) dying soldier. Other indicators, we may recall, have hinted at the "spectrality" of Antonio's initiation into modern life; for at each stage of his transformation, the narration represented his experiences in cinematic terms: during the train ride Antonio viewed the "[d]os cintas de paisaje [que] habían desfilado a derecha e izquierda" (66); in the brothel he "extinguíó su experiencia con la voracidad del fuego en el celuloide" (72); he emerged from the store wearing new clothes and "una sonrisa lavable y un gesto reluciente de celuloide" (90); and once fully assimilated into urban life, his present consisted of "dos planos cinematográficos" (93). Even the "spectacular" moment in the gym, when this exemplary specimen of masculinity is surrounded by admiring men, he is simultaneously "converted" into an abstract monetary value, once more emphasizing the spectrality, incompleteness, and fluidity of his transformation. Indeed, the narrative appears governed by a principle of liquidity with its fluid exchanges of gazes through the shop-window glass, and with its fluid exchanges between the private and public domain—between the image-stream of Antonio's consciousness and the image stream of the spectacular, commercial world beyond.¹⁶ Likewise, a principle of flux governs the categories of gender, for we have seen how, through Antonio's field of vision, the faces of Aurora and her brother, the welter-weight boxer, converge into the same object of desire. And Antonio, too, is in a sense feminized, placed in the role of window-shopper, constituted as *lacking*, and thus a candidate for a "make-over," a re-masculinization.¹⁷

We might therefore read Antonio's simultaneous metamorphosis into modern man and brute boxer as an anxious and incomplete renegotiation of masculine identity. The cultural critic, Kath Woodward argues that boxing today is "still something of an anomaly in a world of transforming gender relations and the emergence of greater social inclusion and equality in social relations" at large (2). "If

boxing is a bastion of traditional masculinities, how does this persist in a climate of change?” she asks (2). This notion that boxing provides one of the few remaining venues for celebrating masculine aggression has become the consensus view among historians and sociologists of sport. Elliot Gorn, vividly describes the function of boxer in early 20th-century societies: “Alive in every nerve, the boxer was in complete control of his body, negating by example the pervasive fears of overcivilization, nervous breakdowns, and neurasthenia. The ring countered effeminizing tendencies, preparing men for the life of strife” (202). For the crowds drawn to this ritual combat, Gorn adds: “Prizefighting upheld fantasies of untrammelled masculinity” for urban fans locked into distinctly unvirile jobs—in offices, shops, and factories (202). The spectators, “by passively imbibing images of ultramasculine action, by sitting aback and watching others bleed, could have it both ways, extolling prowess while filling the role of consumer” (Gorn 202).

Yet this very function of prizefighting as a site for *projecting* “pervasive fears of overcivilization” or for *imbibing* “fantasies of untrammelled masculinity” may imply a fluidity, an insubstantiality, in that sought-after image of bounded masculinity. What “Cazador en el alba,” suggests, by depicting Antonio’s self-projected transformation in such ambiguous and specular terms, is the ephemeral nature of such quests for gendered embodiment. The text reveals the boxing ring as a conflicted and phantasmagoric zone, where desires and anxieties are projected and reflected in an ongoing and inconclusive exchange.

II. The Angel of White Supremacy

This unresolved tension between embodiment and disembodiment, between physicality and spectrality, is further examined in another vanguardist story by Ayala, “El boxeador y el ángel.” In this short sketch, the boxer is coached by an ever-present, invisible angel who rides on his shoulder, a disembodied counterpart to the athlete’s brute physical presence. The opening passage situates the action, once more, in a hypermodern society of mass communications:

Las muchachas, cogidas del brazo, lanzaban discos de risa: arandelas eléctricas, giratorias, a lo largo de los alambres del telégrafo.

Los trenes—despeinados, heridos—se doblaban sobre un costado. Abrían gritos de espanto. Desgarraban el paisaje.

[. . .]

Y campos rectangulares—con jersey a rayas blancas y azules—cazaban en red frutos deportivos. (113)

In a series of metaphors, the narrator evokes a dynamic landscape infused with sports: the laughing girls are cast as discus-throwers, launching “disks of laughter” that are carried along the telegraph wires. The trains are personified as wounded fighters, doubled-over in pain, their frightening shrieks ripping at the landscape. And in an inventive metonym, the rectangular soccer fields are subjectified: dressed in blue and white striped jerseys, as they hunt the “fruits” of sport.

Against this dynamic backdrop the boxer ambles by, wearing a quiet, confident smile, as “dictated” by the authoritarian angel who rides on his shoulder. In a perfect pathetic fallacy, his environs reflect his status as fighter: “[l]a fábrica aplastada bajo el cielo, le clavaba su puñal. El cielo: cómo se desangraba por dentro [. . .] La tarde, exangüe se cogía a las paredes. No podría levantarse ya, víctima del contrincante negro” (113-14). The sky, stabbed by the factory chimney, lies bleeding; then the evening slowly bleeds to death, a victim of its black opponent. These intimations of defeat lead the boxer to say, “¡Ay, ángel! Vamos. Vamos a investigar la suerte. Mi suerte en el combate, ángel compañero” (113).

They approach “[a]l hombre del oráculo,” “un mercader de presagios” (and a Jew, the narrator makes a point of emphasizing). The merchant has a trained bird, “un pájaro de la suerte,” that emerges from its cage and picks a colored piece of paper, as the boxer’s heart, “puño de Dios,” pounds with anticipation. Inscribed on the paper is the boxer’s destiny, “vencerás” (115). The angel, “borracho de optimismo,” slaps him on the back, repeating: “Vencerás, maestro. Al fin y al cabo, no se trata sino de un negro. De un miserable negro” (115).

The scene cuts to the ring, as the narrator recounts an interracial contest, using language charged with racist imagery. With a sly joke, he expresses anxiety about white vulnerability against hyperembodied black men: “un hombre blanco parece como que pelea más al descubierto” (116). And indeed, the black boxer, with his “[s]onrisa de jazmines,” appears invulnerable during the greater part of the fight: “No había manera de enrojecer los jazmines. No podía borrarle al negro su gesto afrentoso; quebrar la línea irónica de su esquivada” (116). The white fighter finds himself flummoxed, unable to “redden” those “jasmine” teeth, unable to land a jab on that elastic, weaving body, for his opponent appears to be “un negro de goma” (116). As the white fighter falters, the angel acts as a coach, egging him on: “Ahora, ahora, imbécil. Dale ahora” (116). Meanwhile, the black boxer grows more powerful: “crecido como una hoguera—fuego y jazmines—atacaba. ¡Plac! ¡Plac!” (117). After taking a powerful punch from that “atroz mazazo,” the bloodied white boxer falls on his knees: “Sensación líquida, confusa. El cerebro, ceñido como por una anilla. Nada: discos rojos, naranja. Las luces, estrellas fugaces: de verbena” (117). The referee begins the count, but the invisible angel springs into action, lifting the

boxer from the armpits, encouraging him—“Anda. Un esfuerzo. Puedes levantarte. Anda: ¡Aup!”—and the dazed boxer manages to stumble to his corner (117). In the last round, the tide starts to turn:

Obstinado el negro en su risa sinvergüenza, de biseles blancos; en su juego de puñales.

El otro le opuso una risa nueva, de aurora boreal. Se fue al adversario. Tres pasos seguros y un golpe en la mandíbula.

Se le suicidó la sonrisa al negro, cortada—rabo de flor—entre los dientes. Se le voló al cielo. ¡Por fin!

Y el cuerpo, descentrado, cayó como un globo sin gas, bajo los aplausos del ángel. Dos vueltas—color café—en el cuadrado. (118)

The white boxer thus exacts his revenge. Riled by the “shameless, white-beveled smile” of a black man who dared rise above his station, the protagonist flashes a smile in return (albeit bloodied like the *aurora borealis*) and strikes a definitive blow. The black boxer’s smile then “commits suicide,” as he falls spinning to the deck. When he tries to stand, “la mirada voluntariosa del pugilista blanco le apretaba—pértiga eficaz—contra el tablado” (118). Nevertheless, the black boxer rises once more, only to take another blow. The referee makes the final count. Then the angel places “su pie rosado sobre el pecho del negro boxeador. (Alborozo de alas y palmadas),” as the referee raises the fist of the victorious white man (118). The story ends with a blunt verdict: “Vencedor por k.o” (118).

The angel that shadows the boxer in Ayala’s story is a curious figure, a disembodied being who serves as a catalyst for the boxer’s triumphant embodiment. By virtue of his status as angel, he would seem to endow his protégé with “divine right,” at once enabling and blessing his victory. Yet as Rosa Navarro Durán points out, “[t]eatralmente podríamos afirmar que el personaje falta al decoro de su condición”; and as a consequence, “nuestro concepto de ‘ángel’ queda hecho trizas” (63). This angel of white supremacy is decidedly down-to-earth; he behaves like a backslapping, teasing sidekick, who feeds vicariously off the triumphs of his athletic friend. Far from divine, he acts as a specter of ideology, as the invisible “body” of racist discourse ever-present in the ring. In the angel’s final gesture, when he places his foot on the fallen boxer’s chest, we may detect a trace of irony. Indeed, reading from a present-day standpoint, we might wish to find critical commentary in that cartoonish exaggeration of white masculine triumph.¹⁸ But in the final analysis, this disturbing story can only leave present-day readers unsettled, uncertain whether to read it as an affirmation of racial superiority or as ironic mockery, and that inconclusiveness is perhaps the point.

For whether wittingly or unwittingly, the story reflects the all-too-typical racial anxieties played out in boxing rings throughout Europe and the Americas in the first decades of the 20th century. Once black boxers (such as Jack Johnson and Joe Louis in the U.S. or the “Battling Siki” in France) began to compete against whites and win titles, there arose a perennial search for the “great white hope.”¹⁹ Moreover, in an age of colonial empire, interracial matches were typically publicized as contests between civilization and savagery.²⁰ For contemporary Spanish readers, the triumphant white boxer in Ayala’s story may have had particular resonance after Spain’s recent misadventures in North Africa.

“Pugilato entre negros y blancos,” proclaims a headline from the sports section of the illustrated magazine *Estampa* (see fig. 1). The brief article of 1928 provides an interesting point of reference for “El boxeador y el ángel.” The match it describes, or others like it, could well have been among the “insignificancia[s], o vista[s] o soñada[s]” that formed the base of experience for Ayala’s vanguardist stories (Proemio 10):

La reanudación de la temporada pugilística se ha señalado por la invasión de los negros. Cuatro hombres de color han asaltado el viernes el “ring” de Price. Sus cuerpos de ébano han danzado bajo las pantallas cegadoras que prestaban reflejos blanquísimos a sus ojos y a sus dientes. Han luchado en pugilatos reñidos y sangrientos con cuatro blancos y, además de blancos, madrileños. (n.p.)

The descriptive language here—the “ebony bodies” contrasted with “blinding” white reflections off teeth and eyes—offers parallels with the visual imagery in Ayala’s story. The action in the ring is depicted artistically, almost abstractly, as a clash between darkness and light, black and white, with splashes of red, thus foregrounding once more the spectrality of this embodied spectacle. The article goes on to disclose the mixed outcome of the fights: one “honorable tie,” three victories by the local white boxers, and one loss to the African boxer Soya:

El público ha podido solazarse con un honroso empate de Ortiz y con dos magníficas y concluyentes victorias de Cipriano Torres y de “Ino.” Pero ha tenido que llorar la caída de su antiguo gran ídolo Antonio Ruiz, derribado; roto por la “boxe” clarividente de Soya, maravillosa máquina anatómica con la energía y la ciencia polarizada en dos puños destructoras. (n.p.)

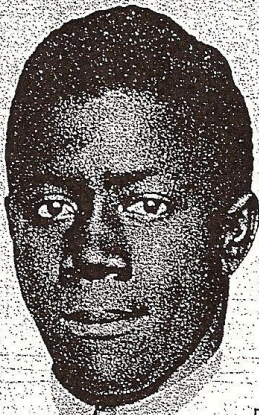
Evident here is an oft-remarked aspect of boxing’s appeal—what Kath Woodward calls its “stark dualism”: “In its elemental, primitive combat between two people in the ring,” she contends, “it offers the promise, or threat, of resolution. There is no real escape from the binary of winning or losing, but

this is also what is so attractive about boxing; it provides a space in which this anxiety can be confronted” (Woodward 154).

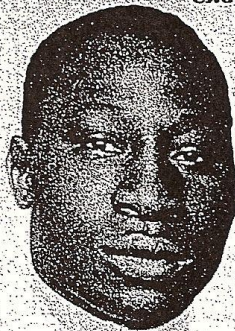
Yet, in so far as white spectators of racially charged contests confront their own anxiety around racial superiority, they only temporarily assuage it. Again and again, they must revisit that scene of struggle, once more affirming white masculinity and white supremacy, while once more vicariously risking defeat. Within the unstable logic of racism, as Gerald Early points out, the “abnormalities and anxieties of the white mind are the normal, unalterable reality of the dark mind. The black, as always, is the white’s secret, unsuppressed yet defective self” (29). The formation of racist man is therefore ever incomplete, ever shadowed by that secret, defective self that must be ritually externalized and then driven back into the shadows. Hence, the promise of an eminently material resolution to that “stark dualism” can only be delivered immaterially, through symbolism. In the racially charged boxing match, that spectacle of physical struggle between black and white is thus rendered specular, becoming a symbolic site for the projection and reflection of fears and desires.

“Modern prizefighting,” Gerald Early observes, is a “remarkable metaphor for the philosophical and social condition of men (and, sometimes, women) in modern mass society”; he calls it as “a kind of dumb play of the human crisis of identity in the modern society” (xiv). Ayala’s unsettling and ambiguous stories of physical combat, subsumed into a society of spectacle, further multiply the figurative effects of this remarkable cultural metaphor that is boxing. In so doing, his stories capture the multiple anxieties and desires already projected upon the boxing ring, only to reveal their specularity and re-project them back for critical reflection.

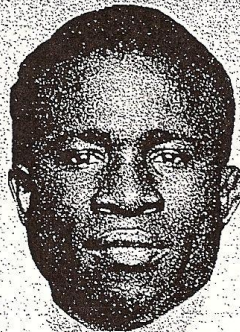
Estampa



Contray.



Beu Diougou.



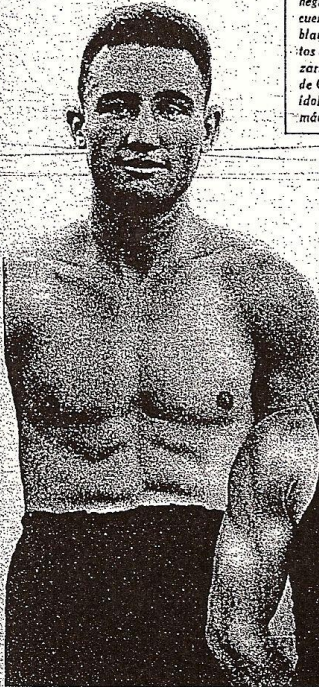
Teté.



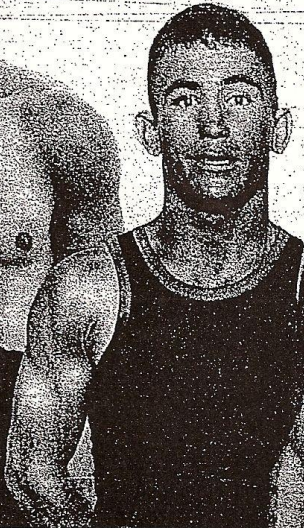
Soya.

PUGILATO ENTRE NEGROS Y BLANCOS

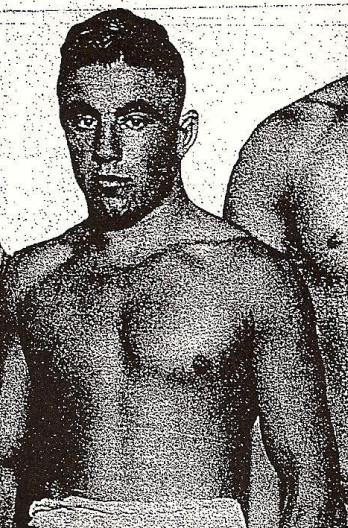
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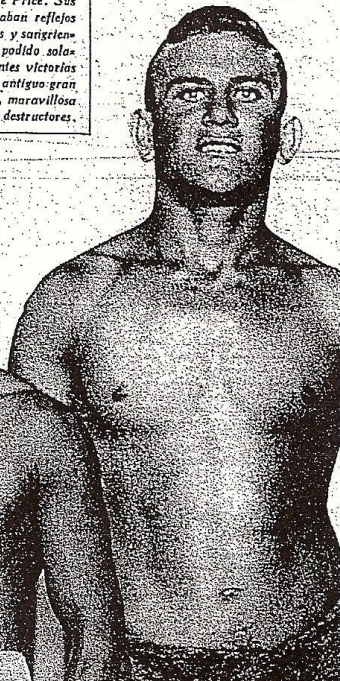
Torres.



Antonio Ruiz.



Ortiz.



«Inos».

(Fotos Alvaro.)



AUTOMOVILES

GRAHAM-PAIGE

DISTRIBUIDORES EN MADRID Y BARCELONA

Fig. 1**Notes**

¹ With these reflections on his literary trajectory, Ayala introduced his collection of civil war stories, *La cabeza del cordero* (1949).

² For notable studies of Ayala's vanguardist narratives, refer to works by Rafael de Cózar, Keith Ellis, Raquel Macciuci, José M. del Pino, Ignacio Soldevila-Durante, and Manuel Angel Vásquez Medel.

³ In his memoir, *Recuerdos y olvidos*, Ayala provides an account of the impact of the Annual disaster: "El desastre desencadenó una fuerte campaña pro responsabilidades que traía en jaque al régimen, y yo, siguiendo con apasionamiento las manifestaciones de esa campaña, acudí al mitin 'monstruo' [. . .]" (128). He goes on to describe the mass protest meeting he attended at age 17.

⁴ The magistrate, General Juan Picasso, produced a report, *El expediente Picasso*, which was subsequently suppressed. For further information see Sebastian Balfour (75-79, 93).

⁵ Sebastian Balfour offers a detailed history of the Moroccan war. Balfour also documents the extensive use of poisonous gas by Spanish forces on Rifian rebels and civilians. Chapter one of Juan José López Barranco's study provides an overview of the Spanish military presence in Morocco from the 19th century onward. Also see Alejandro Quiroga's book on the nationalization of the masses under Primo de Rivera's regime.

⁶ I take the term "regenerationist dictatorship" from Alejandro Quiroga (33). Eduardo González Calleja cites various indicators of economic growth from 1922 to 1930, among them: the PIB (Producto Interior Bruto) grew at an annual rate of 4.1% (216); industrial production increased 5.5% annually (223); the production of electricity increased 120% (226); and the telephone network tripled in size (234). According to José Luis García Delgado and Juan Carlos Jiménez, the national highway system doubled in size under the Primo de Rivera regime (68-69).

⁷ For statistics on the expansion and "hierarchization" of urban centers, see Santos Juliá (45-48). For an account of improvements in public health, the rise in the standard of living, and the transformation of urban space, see Eduardo González Calleja (259-316).

⁸ Numerous critics have remarked on the ominous shadows behind Ayala's exuberant vanguardist prose. Thomas Mermal observes "una nota de angustia" in "Cazador en el alma," and an "augurio apocalíptico" in "Erika en el

invierno” (60). Marina Martín sees in the ambiguous ending of “Cazador”: “una clara y escalofriante conciencia de un porvenir bélico, apocalíptico” (96). And Elena Barroso Villar considers the novella an example of those “visiones apocalípticas” [que] “presentan la ciudad como un monstruo devorador de sus propios hijos” (99). In Juan Cano Ballesta’s view, “Ayala presiente los negros nubarrones que oscurecen el horizonte” (178).

⁹ See *Historia de las fuerzas armadas*, vol. 2, for a brief history of cavalry regiments in Spain, including their operations in the War in Morocco (74-75).

¹⁰ José Monleón discusses the “series of falls” that mark the “different illuminating moments” throughout the narration. For Monleón, the parallel between Antonio and St. Paul suggests that Antonio, like the Apostle, will undergo a conversion and “join the new civilization that will eventually define the Western world” (125-28).

¹¹ Ayala was intensely interested in cinema and published a collection of theoretical essays, *Indagaciones del cinema* (1929). A number of critics have addressed the cinematographic techniques evident in Ayala’s literary prose. See, for example, articles by José Monleón and Patrick Duffey.

¹² Refer to José M. del Pino for a discussion of how the exuberance of images in “Cazador en el alba” reflects the hyperstimulus of urban life and the “urbanización de la conciencia” (155-73).

¹³ Rafael Bosch offers an allegorical reading of “Cazador en el alba.”

¹⁴ Elena Barroso Villar examines the feminine stereotypes in the novella: from the mannequin and prostitute, to the goddess and “mujer fatal” that converge in the figure of Aurora.

¹⁵ I am indebted to Patricia Keller’s discussion of the spectrality of spectacle. See her study of haunting in contemporary Spanish culture.

¹⁶ Refer to Pilar Bellido Navarro’s discussion of the dialectical ambivalence between *yo-otro* and *interior-exterior* in the novella.

¹⁷ I paraphrase here from Rachel Bowlby’s study of gender and consumer culture (32-34).

¹⁸ These exaggerated stereotypes lead Navarro Durán to read the story as critical commentary: “Con mano maestra el narrador nos ofrece los papeles esterotipados con toda su dureza: el protagonista, el boxeador blanco y el antagonista su contrincante negro. El bueno, futuro ganador, frente al malo, al que hay que vencer. El bueno tiene a su lado el ángel. Pero este esquema se sostiene sobre los dos pilares que caracterizan a esas prosas: la ironía demoledora y la creación verbal” (63).

¹⁹ See Gerald Early’s book for a chapter recounting the fight of 1922 when the Senagalese “Battling Siki” (Louis Phal) defeated the Frenchman Georges Carpentier. Also see Keith Piper’s essay on Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Mike Tyson.

²⁰ Gerald Early provides numerous examples from press reports that depict interracial fights in terms of civilized man versus the primitive savage. Moreover, “it was not uncommon at all for interracial fights to be fixed in favor of the white boxer” (72).

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