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THE MEDITERRANEAN CULTURE OF MAURICIO WACQUEZ: CLASSICAL ALLUSIONS IN *FRENTE A UN HOMBRE ARMADO*

Mauricio Wacquez is the most "French" of Spanish authors. Born in 1939 in Colchagua, Chile, of a French father and a Chilean mother, Mauricio Wacquez — who has French, Spanish, and Chilean nationalities — made frequent visits in his youth to his French cousins in the Bordeaux region. He taught philosophy at the Sorbonne (1967-1969), obtained the *Diplôme d'Études Supérieures* from the Sorbonne in 1966 with a thesis on the language of St. Anselm, and in 1977 presented to the Sorbonne his doctoral thesis *La preuve de Dieu chez Saint Anselme*. His study of Sartre, *Conocer Sartre y su obra*, appeared in Spain in three editions (1977, 1979, 1981). The short stories of *Excesos* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1976) were written in France. The experimental novel *Paréntesis* (Barcelona: Barral, 1975) is set in France. *Ella o el sueño de nadie* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1983) contains untranslated passages in French. From 1972, Mauricio Wacquez has lived in Spain, devoting himself to literary translations of French authors (Jean Cocteau, Gustave Flaubert, Julien Green, Michel Leiris, Prosper Mérimée, Raymond Queneau, Stendhal, *et al.*). He is a devotee of the work of Marguerite Yourcenar.

In an interview with Elsa Arana Freire, Mauricio Wacquez declared his nationality to be "Mediterranean":

Podría decir que viviendo en Chile, en una región que repite espléndidamente el clima del Mediterráneo europeo, adquirí eso que Anthony Burgess llama la "nacionalidad mediterránea," algo que participa a la vez de la geografía, de la meteorología y de la historia.

Para bien o para mal, como te digo, la única nacionalidad que reconozco es esa mediterránea. Porque hay razones de tipo cultural que lo apoyan. El Mediterráneo y sus orillas han propiciado las únicas culturas que pueden ser tomadas en cuenta como realmente humanas. Yo tengo una formación humanista, en el peor sentido de la palabra. De la que no voy a renegar nunca. En esas culturas existe una anchura, una capacidad de respiración que no se compadece con los países y nacionalidades modernos. Eran regiones y conceptos del hombre internacionales...¹

I could say that, living in Chile, in a region which splendidly repeats the climate of the European Mediterranean, I acquired what Anthony Burgess calls "Mediterranean nationality," something which has in common geography, meteorology, and history.

For good or ill, as I say, the only nationality that I recognize is that of the Mediterranean. Because there are reasons of a cultural nature to support it. The Mediterranean and its shores have provided the only cultures that can be considered as really human. My formation is humanistic, in the worst sense of the word. This I shall never repudiate. In these cultures there exist a breadth, a capacity to breathe, which is incompatible with modern countries and nationalities. They were international regions and concepts of man...

The French background, both literary and physical, to Mauricio Wacquez's most ambitious novel, *Frente a un hombre armado* (1981), is marked. The novel's subtitle ("Cacerías de 1848") echoes that of Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* ("Chronique de 1830"); the novel begins with an epigraph from Apollinaire ("Hommes de l'avenir, souvenez-vous de moi, / Je vivais à l'époque où finissaient les rois"); the protagonist Juan de Warni claims to be "El Aventurero" (The Adventurer) described by Pierre Loti; the narrator offers the novel as a pastiche of the nineteenth-century French novel of adventures or *folletín*; Leon de Warni and his class represent the iniquities of the society portrayed by Balzac (115, 246); the numerous philosophical reflections of the narrator are those of a generation raised on Pascal and the thinkers of the Enlightenment (246). Central to the novel is the Proustian recreation of the *château*

¹ Elsa Arana Freire, "¿La impostura de un escritor?", 98.

Perier, which dominates the thoughts of Juan de Warni. The action takes place in the France of the 1840s. However, as Juan de Warni dies, strangled by his lover Alexandre, he has a "flash-forward" (an oneiric vision of the life he would not live to lead) to the Revolution of 1848, to the Franco-Prussian War, and to his return to Perier in 1946.

Frente a un hombre armado is one of the most complex of late-twentieth-century novels, breaking as it does conventional limits of time and of character to explore through the "adventures" / homosexually-obsessed dreams / death-agony visions (the narrator suggests all possibilities) of the adolescent Juan de Warni the dialectics of power. Juan de Warni strives to achieve a total reality ("Visión y reflejo, el ser que mira y es mirado, sugieren el consuelo de la totalidad," 220) (Vision and reflection, the being who watches and is watched, suggest the consolation of totality) by becoming the Other, whether through the playing of games (sexual, literary), the wearing of masks, the acting of roles in the *musaraña*, temporal and geographical confusion, reversal of sexual roles, and defiance of all sexual taboos. Throughout the novel a lucid narrator ("no hay ficción inocente," 241) (no fiction is innocent) controls and plays with both reader and narrative.

Reviewers, both in France and Spain, stressed the French background to *Frente a un hombre armado*.² A further dimension to the novel, not noted by critics, is provided by references to the classical universe of ancient Greece and Rome. In a novel where all essay roles, and where the "essence" of a person is hidden and mysterious, there are frequent allusions to the masks worn by the actors of Greek theater. Juan de Warni (who had "died" a century previously) is presented in 1946 as an "adolescente," "como los actores del antiguo teatro eran a veces la máscara de la juventud" (19) (as the actors of classical theater were at times the mask of youth). From the studies of Greek, Latin, and philosophy imposed by Monsieur Albert, the young and passionate Juan de Warni retains as relevant to his truth only "algún poema, o la tragedia griega o Shakespeare" (39) (an occasional poem or Greek tragedy or Shakespeare). The

² For a summary of critical opinions on *Frente a un hombre armado*, see Brian J. Dendle, "Mauricio Wacquez (1939-): A Preliminary Bibliography."

removal of masks, exposure to the light of the sun, threatens annihilation: "el encuentro con un nuevo orden moral, la desaparición de una máscara que me dejaba el rostro a plena luz, amenazando con calcinarlo" (48) (the encounter with a new moral order, the removal of a mask which left my face exposed to full light, threatening it with calcination). All wear masks: "todos llevan consigo su juego de máscaras" (63) (all bear with them their set of masks). The imprecise contours of the typhus-ridden Juan de Warni's surroundings recall "los cuadros de moda en los que la corte se regodea imitando tragedias griegas" (107) (the fashionable paintings in which the court takes pleasure in imitating Greek tragedies). Juan realizes that our parts in life are assigned "con la equidad de los roles en el teatro" (135) (with the impartiality of roles in the theater). With this realization, Juan allots himself the role of tyrant in a Greek tragedy, whose destiny (and meaning in life) is to be killed and supplanted (in this case by his conqueror, the fair Alexandre): "Pensé en Alexandre como en el verdadero destinatario de mi puesto, sentí una inexplicable dulzura al imaginarlo cuajado de luces y de oros, hiriéndome en el corazón con un dardo o una espada, como en las tragedias antiguas, donde el déspota encuentra en el derrocamiento y la muerte el verdadero sentido de su gloria" (135) (I thought of Alexandre as the true heir to my position; I felt an inexplicable sweetness as I imagined him adorned with lights and gold, stabbing me in the heart with an arrow or a sword, as in the ancient tragedies, where the despot finds in his overthrow and death the true meaning of his glory). Juan explains the dialectic of power to His Highness the Prince; true victory produces what the "ancients" termed "catharsis," to be found in the acceptance of death, that is, in submission to the penetration of the stronger: "Es lo que los antiguos llamaban catarsis y que yo he vivido y buscado más de una vez en mi vida" (145) (It's what the ancients called catharsis and what I have lived and sought more than once in my life).

Masks permit concealment and also facilitate metamorphosis, as in the game of the *musaraña*. A related classical theme is that of the hunt and of the reversal of roles of the hunter and the hunted. Hunting is power ("la caza, como ejercicio del poder," 97), power over the animal kingdom, over the Indians whom Warni slaughters as a mercenary, and potentially over oneself and one's lovers in the struggle for domination. During a

hunt, Juan de Warni's universe is shattered, as he falls prey to the charms of the young peasant Alexandre: "ese aminoramiento de mi ser mediante el cual pasaba de ser el cazador a ser la presa" (49) (this diminishing of my being by which I passed from being the hunter to being the prey). The hunt allows the union of opposites: "la ambigüedad de la adolescencia me permitía ser el cazador y la caza, mi contrario y mi doble" (188) (the ambiguity of adolescence allowed me to be the hunter and the prey, my adversary and my double). In its essence, however, the hunt in *Frente a un hombre armado* assimilates the events of the novel to an archetypal, mythical universe. In front of Perier stands the statue of Diana (the goddess of the hunt, of chastity, and of adolescence, the goddess whose priest must first slay his predecessor) with her quiver of arrows. References to Diana pervade the novel (19, 65, 107, 184, 251). Only the statue of Diana remains unchanged after the destruction of World War II (19); the final sentence of the novel returns us to "la mirada de Diana, que desde su pedestal proseguía acechando a su presa" (251) (Diana's gaze, which from her pedestal continued to await her prey).³

There are further references to the classical world. Juan de Warni (the hunter and the hunted, sodomizer and sodomee) adapts as his own Monsieur Albert's phrase "extrema se tangunt" (21). Juan de Warni's meditation on death refers us to an ancient world: the burnt offering of myrtle and laurel, the inscription on the sarcophagus, "el bálsamo corrupto de los gestos antiguos" (the corrupt balsam of ancient gestures), the coin placed between the corpse's lips (70). The pain of the act of sodomy is related to Apollo (Diana's brother): "es el desgarro que divide las aguas y eleva la frente de Apolo en un espasmo cósmico" (98) (it's the rent which divides the waters and lifts Apollo's brow in a cosmic spasm); "el relajamiento apolíneo de la espera, la ansiedad desnuda de la belleza" (98) (the Apollonian relaxation of expectation, the naked desire for beauty); "En ese momento todo se halla dispuesto y ambos necesitan el coraje divino de Orfeo violentando a Apolo, ese Apolo

³ In Mauricio Wacquez's unpublished outline of a screenplay for *Frente a un hombre armado* two of the fifty sequences — the second and the fourteenth — give prominence to the statue of Diana.

encabritado al sentirse desnudo bajo el calor de su mitad perdida" (99) (At this moment, everything is ready and both need the divine courage of Orpheus possessing Apollo, this Apollo reared up in his nakedness beneath the heat of his lost half). The sexual act takes place without the caresses which belong to the "dios del amor" (100). The withered but chaste breast of the Prince is that of "una vieja vestal" (138) (an old Vestal). The destroyed Perier of 1946 reminds Juan de Warni of "una catástrofe antigua como la de Pompeya" (214) (an ancient catastrophe such as that of Pompeii). Greek and Hebrew mythology coincide in the mysterious Eugenio, who never appears in the novel, and is identified only by the "sonidos griegos" (Greek sounds) of his name; Eugenio is, the narrator conjectures, possibly confused by the Chevalier with Juan, whose name has Hebraic roots (244).

In a novel in which conventional concepts of time and "reality" are relentlessly undermined, dreams reveal an underlying truth, which is related to that of classical myth. Dreams, with their apparent irresponsibility, are imposed on us by an obscure and strange god: "al pensar en la irresponsabilidad que se deriva de los sueños, sobre los que no tenemos que justificarnos, puesto que nos son impuestos por un dios oscuro y peregrino contra el que sólo cabe la perplejidad" (55) (thinking of the irresponsibility which comes from dream, for which we don't have to justify ourselves, since they are imposed on us by an obscure and strange god before whom the only attitude possible is wonder). Dreams also evoke an ancestral memory, perhaps that of "aquel tribuno germano que rindió pleitesía a Roma a cambio de su vida" (101) (that German tribune who rendered homage to Rome in exchange for his life).

The sight of a naked boy and his horse refers Juan de Warni to his nightly "sueño mítico" (mythic dream) of a centaur: "Mirándolo desde atrás, descubrí de dónde venía el sombrío sueño mítico que me asaltaba cada noche: un centauro entraba en el agua y buscaba a su dios, un dios ancho y profundo como el río, un objetivo lejano y complicado que sólo la clarividencia de un efebo podía entrever" (217) (Looking at him from behind, I discovered the source of the dark, mythic dream which nightly assaulted me: a centaur entered the water and sought its god, a god as broad and deep as the river, a distant and complicated object which only the clairvoyance of an ephebus could imperfectly perceive). The dream takes on "reality" as the unnamed

lad ("el otro Juan"?) possesses in a centaur's embrace Juan who is sprawled across the horse's neck: "Clavado en mí, se quedó quieto, el caballo y él dentro de mí, el caballo, él y yo mezclados por la sangre y el valor del centauro" (218) (Pierced in me, he remained still, the horse and he inside me, the horse, he and I mingled by the blood and the courage of the centaur). The "centaur" is killed the same night; Juan places a coin between his lips, recalling "el golpe de su fuerza, mis manos y mi cuerpo ocupados por la sangre y la semilla del dios" (219) (the thrust of his strength, my hands and my body filled by the blood and the seed of the god). The confusion of classical and Hebraic mythology is reflected in Alexandre's mixture of "inocencia" and "abismo" (abyss), for which "más de un dios fue arrojado del paraíso" (232) (more than one god was cast from paradise).

Mauricio Wacquez provides little guidance to the reader in the complex and deceitful universe of *Frente a un hombre armado*, with its anachronisms, metamorphoses, and elusive protagonist. Juan de Warni escapes the superficial and corrupt civilization of nineteenth-century France, ruled by the fluctuations of the Stock Exchange (245), to enter an archetypal and violent universe, that of Mediterranean classical antiquity. The huntress goddess Diana's dominion over Perier, the numerous references to masks and Greek tragedy, the emphasis on homosexuality and incest (cf. 104-05), the role of myth and dream, the savage mutual killing of Juan and Alexandre (which mirrors, in myth, the violent deaths of the priests of Diana), the ritualistic placing of a coin in the mouth of the dead, Juan de Warni's "Apollonian" gift of foreseeing the future, the intervention of obscurely-intentioned deities to control man's destiny, refer us — at a level far deeper than that of the pastiche of a Balzacian or Stendhalian novel — to sacred mysteries. The references to the classical world not only illuminate regions of Juan de Warni's unconscious; they also, by adding a further layer of reference, heighten the mythical, oneiric quality of this most multi-dimensional of novels.

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