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AN ARGENTINE BABYLON: COSMOPOLITANISM, IMMIGRATION AND THE QUESTION OF MODERNITY IN XUL SOLAR AND EDUARDO MALLEA

ABSTRACT: Through the critical lens of cosmopolitanism this essay addresses urban modernity in Xul Solar's art as well as Eduardo Mallea's texts "Sumersión" and "Conocimiento y expresión de la Argentina". Both the writer and the painter worked at a time when the arrival of immigrants was viewed as a 'threat' to Argentine national purity. While focusing on certain interdisciplinary connections with Xul Solar's visual art, I contend that in his writings Eduardo Mallea undermines the collective anxiety about immigration, while Solar presents a more ambiguous view. The essay examines Buenos Aires urban modernity as intertwined with immigration and emerging cosmopolitanisms, and in doing so focuses on Solar's, and more specifically, Mallea's use of the Tower of Babel and Babylon tropes.

KEYWORDS: Argentine Modernity, Cosmopolitanism, Immigration, E. Mallea, X. Solar.

To Marija and Bozo Majstorovic

Obligado siempre a recordar una tradición perdida, forzado a cruzar la frontera. Así se funda la identidad de una cultura. Esa ha sido la obsesión de la literatura argentina desde su origen. La conciencia de no tener historia, de trabajar con una tradición extranjera; la conciencia de estar en un lugar desplazado e inactual.¹

In 1927, in Buenos Aires, the Argentine artist Xul Solar painted *Drago*. In this watercolor, the dragon is presented in serpent form and is surrounded by a number of international flags. The four flags in the upper left corner belong to Italy, France, Great Britain, and The Kingdom of Yugoslavia. In the lower right corner, the flags are those of Spain, the USA, and Portugal. Along the dragon's body there are numerous flags belonging to other world nations. The dragon appears to be traveling through waves, which seems to be a reflection of the painter's earlier trans-Atlantic trips. A transcultural journey in its own right, this essay proposes a close examination of Solar's painting vis-à-vis the writings of his Argentine contemporary, Eduardo Mallea. It reads their respective views of urban modernity through the critical lens of

¹ Ricardo Piglia's passage from his essay "El duro músculo de la historia" (Buenos Aires: *Página 30*, 6, January 1991) is quoted in Silvia Rosman's *Narrar la nación: Ezequiel Martínez Estrada y el ensayo de interpretación nacional argentino* (Dissertation Abstracts International, 1994) 63.

cosmopolitanism while focusing on a time when the arrival of immigrants (symbolic carriers of international flags) was viewed as a ‘threat’ to Argentine national purity.

The same year that Xul Solar painted *Drago*, Eduardo Mallea abandoned his law career to take a job as a correspondent for *La Nación*. He became the editor of this newspaper’s “Literary Supplement” in 1931, thus assuming one of the key positions in the world of Argentine letters, one that he held for the next 25 years.² In 1931, four years after *Drago* was created, Mallea’s story “Sumersión” appeared in the second issue of *Sur*. Like Xolar’s *Drago*, Victoria Ocampo’s journal was also founded on a strong American premise.³

In 1934, Mallea traveled to Europe. Upon his return, in the second half of the 1930s, he published three novels: *Nocturno Europeo* (1935), dedicated to Victoria Ocampo; *Fiesta en noviembre* (1938); and *La bahía de silencio* (1940). He presented his essay “Conocimiento y expresión de la Argentina” as a series of lectures in 1934, and he published it the following year. “Sumersión” was incorporated into *La ciudad junto al río inmóvil* (1936), a collection of short stories he wrote from 1931 to 1935. In 1937, the best-known collection of Mallea’s essays, *Historia de una pasión argentina*, appeared. Following this controversial yet influential work, Mallea continued to write novels: *Todo verdor perecerá* (1941), *Los enemigos del alma* (1950), and *Chaves and Sala de espera* (1953).

During his European trip in 1934, Eduardo Mallea gave lectures in Italy at the Palacio Giustiniano in Rome, and the Million Gallery in Milan. Mallea addressed his lectures to a European audience, lectures that were written in an attempt to “represent” American—and more specifically, Argentine—identity. In a gesture of communion, his lectures also paid tribute to a subject matter familiar to this audience, namely the European authors Dante, Pascal and Valéry. He then took a more personal tone through which he “turns inward and presents himself as a simple *homo americanus* whose ‘American truth’ arises from an ‘American drama of humanity’ that binds the people of the New World together in a dramatic plight of universal proportions” (Lewald 1977: 33). But Mallea did not dwell too long on this rather anguished American destiny. He quickly turned to examine the physical boundaries of Argentina, from Tierra del Fuego to the Chaco region, and then retreated to its metropolitan capital, Buenos Aires.

² Mallea only abandoned the editorship at *La Nación* for an even more prestigious position: to represent Argentina at UNESCO, in Paris, from 1955 to 1957. Following his trip to India to attend a UNESCO conference in New Delhi, Mallea published, among other titles, *Sinbad* (1957), *Posesión* (1958), *Las travesías* (1961), *El resentimiento* (1966), *La barca de hielo* (1967), *La red* (1968), *La penúltima puerta* (1969), and *Gabriel Andaral and Triste piel de universo* (1971).

³ See Gorica Majstorovic (2005). “An American Place: Victoria Ocampo’s Editorial Politics, the Foundation of *Sur*, and Hemispheric Alliances”. In: Henseler, Christine & Alejandro Herrero-Olaizola (eds.) 2005 *Matters of the Market: Texts & Contexts in Spanish and Latin American Literature*. *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies*. Volume 9. pp. 171-180.

A parallel dramatic plight of anguish takes place in the inner world of the protagonist of Mallea's short story "Sumersión." This 1931 story, set in Buenos Aires, and the 1934-35 essay "Conocimiento y expresión de la Argentina" both address issues of American, Argentine, foreign, and immigrant identities. Most of these cosmopolitan issues are embedded in the use of the Babylon metaphor, which is employed in its various manifestations in both Xul Solar's art and Mallea's writing. In his essay, Mallea is a foreign traveler, largely addressing a European audience. In "Sumersión," however, the discursive positionality of self and "other" is inverted. Mallea is the author of a foreign character, by the name of Avesquín, who comes to Buenos Aires from an unidentified European country. "Sumersión" is divided into two parts, prefaced by an introduction. The first sentence of the story's first part reads, "Avesquín, llegado al puente, se detuvo" (Mallea 1976: 89).⁴ This act of the protagonist's and the narrative's "stopping" prefigures not only a series of subsequent scenes, but also a narrative of deferred access that, in short, constitutes this story.

In a circular movement, "Sumersión" both starts and ends with Avesquín's nightmarish experiences that take place by the docks of Buenos Aires. The city, however, is only named at the very end of the story: "Podía esperar el alba así, inmóvil: las embarcaciones estaban cerca. Las miró con alivio y esperó, antes de volver los ojos hacia esa elevación ya distante, donde comenzaba la ciudad, sus edificios, el páramo inmenso: Buenos Aires" (Mallea, 1976: 133). The immobility of the last scene of this text, where only the protagonist's eyes move along the urban horizon, is further highlighted through the comparison of the city to an immense desolate land. This scene resembles Xul Solar's 1927 painting *Puerto Azul*, which, like several of Solar's paintings from the late 1920s, has the port of Buenos Aires as its subject.⁵ Avesquín's gaze, while he stands still in the Buenos Aires harbor and observes the city, recalls the beginning of the work. The city, which in the end of the story is given its name, is summarized in the first paragraph of the story:

Aquella ciudad no ofrecía destinos blandos, aquella ciudad marcaba. Su gran sequedad era un aviso; su clima, su luz, su cielo azul mentían. Una riqueza fabulosa ocultaba el hierro rojo. Sin embargo era el país del hierro rojo, animales y hombres lo soportaban en el campo y en la ciudad. Esta tenía un aspecto amable y engañoso: engañaban sus calles rectas y limpias, tan hospitalarias que hasta su seno entraban, venidos de ultramar, las chimeneas y los mástiles para mezclarse con los árboles del país, en sus plazas. (Mallea, 1976: 86)

⁴ I quote Mallea's text as it appeared in the second issue of *Sur* in 1931, reprinted in 1976.

⁵ Agustín Alejandro Shultz Solari changed his name to Xul Solar, a derivation of *lux solaris* (sunlight) and a play on his family names. Throughout his life he was interested in philosophy and the occult, architecture, and astrology.

Buenos Aires, in Mallea's words, is the city that leaves a mark. The actual narrative of "Sumersión," in its two parts, is a series of marks: marks that the encounters with city dwellers leave on Avesquín, while an omniscient narrator continuously stamps interpretative marks onto the protagonist and the narration. In addition to these interpretative marks, which mostly consist of reflections about the national character, there are also contingent marks encrusted onto the narrative through the contamination of and proximity of this story to Mallea's essays.

Alongside these numerous marks, in its title Mallea's story clearly announces a trope of submersion. Closely related to the maritime metaphors that are spread throughout the piece, placed in references to Buenos Aires' port and its ships, there are narrative "submersions" into the inner world of Avesquín. Consequently, the story's omniscient narrator develops the plot around Avesquín's submersions into the interpretation of city-life "waters" as well. Furthermore, the submersion metaphor in this 1931 story is paradigmatic of Mallea's essayistic interpretations of alienated individuals in search of spiritual salvation. While submerged in mass society, Mallea remarks that the individual of his time long ago lost the ability to discover yet another submerged reality, that of "authentic" living.⁶ This submerged or "subterranean" living lies underneath the world of phenomena in the individual's immediate surroundings. Mallea's quest for a "submerged" and therefore "authentic" Argentine individual leads him, when he extends these reflections to society at large, to a polarizing view of the visible and invisible Argentina.

The use of the submersion metaphor assists Mallea in his attempt to tear off masks from the emerging modernity of "the visible land." He is compelled to seek the submerged or, in other words, the invisible and therefore "true" land. In doing so, he "uncovers the layers of false urban civilization and puts his ear on the ground of the silent pampas in order to listen for the heartbeat of the land" (Lewald 1977: 35). For Mallea, the domain of the visible, and consequently the "untrue" and "inauthentic," resides at the center of Argentine modernity, in its capital. In his address to a European audience in Rome and Milan, Mallea enacted a politics of representation in terms that compared Buenos Aires to a "Babylonian prolongation" of the Argentine Pampa:

Está separada de vosotros por el Atlántico y por uno de los ríos más grandes y más raros del mundo. Cuándo entráis en este río estáis ya en nuestra circunstancia dramática; este río yacente, en forma de horizonte, es la prolongación fluvial de la Pampa, así como Buenos Aires es su prolongación babilónica. (Lewald, 1977: 73)

The characteristics of this "Babylonian prolongation," which according to Mallea resides in contaminating foreign elements that are opposed to the purity of the Argentine inland, are also dramatized in "Sumersión." In *Historia de una pasión argentina*, Mallea continues his quest for

⁶ A similar contemporary quest takes place in *Medianeras (Sidewalks)*, a 2011 film set in Buenos Aires, directed by Gustavo Taretto.

“the authentic tradition, the land...the true roots in our songs, our dances, our cultural activities,” all contaminated by European malaise (Mallea, 1961: 351).

The notion of contamination, which is a significant component of the Tower of Babel and Babylon tropes, is crucial in both Mallea’s essays and “Sumersión.” Not only is Avesquín submerged in a hostile and alienating urban modernity, but he also faces and engages the contaminating forces that threaten both his own spiritual “purity” and that of the country he is visiting, Argentina. This “red iron country,” as Argentina is described in Mallea’s introduction to the story, has a friendly yet deceptive character. In relation to the deceit of the “calles rectas y limpias” of its metropolis, the contaminating forces “venidos de ultramar” are then mixed with the trees standing on the city’s squares (Mallea, 1976: 86). Hence, the native and the foreign in the formation of the Argentine capital are irretrievably mingled together.

Mallea uses and rewrites the Babylon trope in a manner parallel to that of Armando Discépolo’s 1925 play *Babilonia*. Although both authors refer to Buenos Aires as “a pitiless Babylon,” Mallea takes the Babylon metaphor a step further and, in doing so, extends the definition of Buenos Aires to the “visible” Argentine land at large. As he defines Argentina’s construction in terms of mixtures of different components, Mallea is critical of the end result of this process because, in his view, it corrupts Argentina’s original “purity.” The marks on the “red iron country” that he writes about in “Sumersión” are thus signs of both submersion and contamination. Subsequently, these marks are painfully encrusted on Avesquín, a newcomer to the port of Buenos Aires. However, the protagonist of “Sumersión” is not depicted as yet one more immigrant to the country who arrives, as Mallea puts it, on “proas cargadas de racimos humanos” (1976: 87). Rather, Avesquín arrives on a transatlantic commercial ship and disembarks in Buenos Aires to be the only person from this ship to stay in the city.

Seven thousand immigrants arrive weekly to Buenos Aires, Mallea writes. According to his observation, immigrants—in contrast to cosmopolitan foreign visitors—possess a thirst for an immediate conquest. “Muchos soportaban la marca roja con ojos dolientes y firmes,” Mallea continues, “como en el interior del país los mansos ganados” (1976: 87-8). The comparison of immigrants to docile beasts is further scrutinized in Mallea’s description of the port. It is here where most of the immigrants arrive and in whose miserable living conditions they mostly stay: “en esta región vaga – tierra de nadie de la ciudad – otros, débiles, se retorcían, gritaban sordamente ante el olor de su carne señalada” (Mallea, 1976: 88). Only the strongest ones, Mallea states, employing Darwinian logic, will be able to leave this “no man’s land” and enter the city. Those that are weak will have to remain in the port, while the inhabitants of the city, Mallea concludes, will never know of their miseries.

The large ships that arrived to the port of Buenos Aires in the late 19th and early 20th century carried thousands of immigrants who were subsequently transported onto smaller ships to the port and then to the *Hotel de Inmigrantes*. The owner of those smaller ships operating in the port of Buenos Aires was also an immigrant, one that would later become not only the most

affluent person in the port of Buenos Aires, but also one of the richest men in Argentina and Latin America at large. An immigrant from Croatia (then colony of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), Nicolás Mihanovich became known as the king of the Argentine shipping industry.⁷ The shipping magnate was also the one-time owner of *Banco de Italia*, with over half of the 6 million immigrants in Argentina arriving from Italy.

The scenes describing the immigrant barracks in “Sumersión” offer a sharp contrast to the lifestyle of the metropolitan citizens, who are “demasiado atentos a la pequeña ingeniería de su alma y a la inmensa ingeniería de su ciudad” (Mallea, 1976: 88). These urban scenes resemble what—later in the century—the Uruguayan Mario Benedetti will address in his poetry and the Chilean Diamela Eltit would confront in her novel *Lumpérica* (1980). As with Eltit’s city, submerged in the blinding lights of its neon commercials, the port of Buenos Aires is crowded with impoverished movie houses, hostels with picturesque names but appalling living conditions, improvised newsstands, and bars playing international music. “¡Felices los que de ese limbo oscuro subían a una nave de vuelta!” (Mallea 1976: 89), the narrator exclaims at the end of the story’s introduction. Avesquín, as the reader encounters him at the end of “Sumersión,” gazing at the city, may indeed be one of the fortunate newcomers to embark on a ship taking him back across the Atlantic.

In the beginning of the first part of Mallea’s story, we do not encounter Avesquín engaged in productive labor activities, as it would be pertinent to an immigrant subject. Rather, we see him in a state of immobility and contemplation. This contemplative nature of Avesquín’s stay in Buenos Aires approximates his character to a narrative role frequently associated with a disillusioned traveler, or an accidental visitor. Avesquín’s contemplative nature and his escapism of sorts, which is soon explained as rooted in the grief over the premature death of his wife, is characterized, as is common in Mallea, with despair, reticence, and overall existential anguish. In the midst of these tormented feelings, nostalgia for the home left behind emerges as the only positive trace on Avesquín’s troubled psyche:

En la urbe, ante la grandiosidad helada, la suntuosidad vertical de una sorda Babilonia, las mil diagonales de cemento blanco, extrañaba su tierra, el Café de los Intelectuales, el teatro Cómico, la señorita Iva, las iglesias barrocas del suburbio, los muelles de madera de su río nativo, descompuestos y hediondos. (Mallea, 1976: 90-91)

⁷ Nicolás Mihanovich arrived in Buenos Aires from Doli, a village near Dubrovnik, Croatia, in 1867; soon thereafter, he started a shipping business that led to the 1887 establishment of the first ferry service between Buenos Aires and Colonia, Uruguay. By 1909, the Argentine Navigation Company – Nicolás Mihanovich Ltd. operated over 350 vessels. El Edificio Mihanovich, built in 1929 (and the tallest building in Argentina and Latin America at the time), today houses the Hotel Sofitel Buenos Aires. It is said that Mihanovich wanted to be able to see the port of Buenos Aires and his ships from the tower on the top of the building. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, at the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), is located in the former Palace Hotel that Mihanovich built in 1906.

Submerged in a pitiless Babylon, a monstrous city filled with brutal deafness, Avesquín relies on images left behind. He is compelled to seek meaningful contact, even if the only possible communion is that with his own past. However, Avesquín's fading memory is further blurred through the Babelic mix of references that Mallea comprises in writing about his protagonist's past. In order to achieve an effect of unidentified geographic cross-references, the narrator resorts to another contaminating strategy and, in doing so, refuses to name the specific place of Avesquín's European origins. Subsequently, the narration presents a gradual construction of Avesquín's character.

The reader is first introduced to his intellectual interests, including a generic "Café de los Intelectuales," and the "Teatro Cómico" of his native city. Later in the story, the reader discovers Avesquín is a painter. His artistic abilities play an important role in his arrival to Buenos Aires. In his native city, while married to a Sephardic Jewish woman from the Greek port of Thesaloniki, Avesquín painted an image of the Acropolis in various bars and hotels. One day, a captain of a ship walks into a bar and sees one of Avesquín's paintings. The captain admires it and offers to commission Avesquín to paint the image of the Acropolis in the salon of his ship, soon to embark for Buenos Aires. Avesquín accepts the captain's proposal. The rudimentary Spanish he has learned from his wife (a speaker of the Spanish-related Ladino) will be helpful in Buenos Aires, he thinks.

Avesquín's character is not constructed as a privileged cosmopolitan traveler. Rather, he is presented closer to the notions of "free errancy." Upon his arrival to Buenos Aires, he spends "dos semanas errando," submerged in the immigrant world of the port: "Caminar, caminar, devorar caminos; y en cada reposo no oír sino el eco constante de los pasos" (Mallea, 1976: 97). Djelal Kadir has studied the duality of the term "errant" as the notion that best characterizes the process to which he refers as quest. In Kadir's words, "errancy" is "a pursuit of questing after and, at the same time, never an over-taking, always a mis-taking, an errant accommodation displacing the pursued cipher by endless re-encipherments" (1986: 7).

Errant throughout the city, Avesquín shows his painting of the Acropolis, hoping that someone else will commission him to paint it. His search goes without success. An initial enthusiasm he had felt upon arrival causes the city to appear to him like "una granada de pulpa blanca" (Mallea 1976: 96). After days of aimless wandering, submerged in silence and with an acquired hatred towards his urban surroundings, the city still looks intriguing to Avesquín, yet now as a dry and flavorless fruit. It is at the end of the first part of the story that the essayistic prose not only overlaps with the narrative development, but also progressively dominates the text. In fact, it appears as if Mallea were writing "Conocimiento y expresión de la Argentina" across the pages of "Sumersión."

In the last passages of the first part of the story, Avesquín is submerged yet again in his observations of the city—first from the window of the hotel "Amsterdam" and later in his aimless walks around the city, where he watches the bustling urban crowds: "Entre la multitud,

rozándose con facciones apremiadas, rojas, veloces, le parecía caminar atrás” (Mallea 1976: 101).⁸ Avesquín is under the impression that he is walking backwards, that is to say, that he is walking in the opposite direction of the flow of people who already “occupy” the place. He tries to find spiritual rescue in the San Estéfano Cathedral, but runs away from it, overwhelmed with anguish over its visitors. No building standing on the city’s asphalt, not even a religious one, offers salvation for Avesquín’s torment. Although he suffers a “mortal torture,” this torture is caused less by his “infinite isolation” than by being far from nature. As Mallea puts it, Avesquín is doomed because he lives far from the “fuentes frescas” of the Argentine countryside. By the same token, Mallea ascribes “imprecise readings” of the Argentine interior to his character in order to further support his claim for an “authentic” life, a life only found far from modernity and the urban metropolis:

Ya sabía él lo que era esta metrópoli, el capitán se lo había susurrado, sentencioso, casi con un aire sibilino, al llegar, frente al caserío monstruoso. Tierra de prostitución, de falsos símbolos. Tierra húmeda, nueva y maravillosa, vencida por el oro del sacrificio ganadero; vencida por el capital de un cúmulo de miserables generaciones arribadas de regiones extrañas a la comodidad y a la ambición, a la adulteración de lo espectable. (Mallea, 1976: 103)

The second part of the story is developed around those places in the port where the Babylon theme emerges from scenes of prostitution and urban delinquency. The classic precedent in this genre is Dekker Thomas’ 1607 work entitled *The Whore of Babylon*. In this sense, Mallea reads the Buenos Aires of the early 1930s as a vanity fair filled with “eschatological spectacles” (Mallea, 1976: 105). While mimicking the writing style of the sensationalist press, Mallea enumerates sideshows and music halls in this area. These are sideshows where one could see Siamese twins, the panoramic view of scenes from World War I, or “la mujer menos mujer del mundo” (Mallea, 1976: 104). He does not explain the characteristics of this “womanless woman,” but rather takes the reader into a German bar, filled, in his words, with the weak foreign creatures incited to deformation and constantly on a defense. The narrator then takes Avesquín into the interior of the Avon bar and brothel, where a large part of the subsequent narration takes place. Some male visitors are singing, and fifteen show girls are dancing on the stage. The first person with whom Avesquín converses is the bar’s owner, Madame Cier. She is a dwarf-like woman, choleric and agitated, constantly busy giving orders to the waiters and entertaining the clients.

⁸ Upon the arrival of massive waves of immigration to the country at the turn of the century, urban multitudes appear as a frequent theme in Argentine letters; see Ramos Mejía’s *Multitudes argentinas*, or, among other examples, sections of Eduardo Wilde’s autobiography *Aguas abajo*. See also Adolfo Saldías’ *Bianchetto: La patria del trabajo* (1896), Francisco Grandmontagne’s *Los inmigrantes prósperos* (1896), and Francisco Sicardi’s *Libro extraño* (1894-1902).

The following scene, which Mallea describes in larger detail, focuses on the ceremonial entrance into the bar by a man called Grand. A group, singing in one corner, welcomes his entrance with a loud chorus of voices: “¡Viva el poeta eslavo Evaristo Grand!” (109). The reader is not offered any details into the nature of Grand’s poetic endeavors. Instead, s/he follows the description of the stunned repulsion that Avesquín experiences in the brothel. After an intercalated narration, in which Madame Cier tells him about an experience in which she found her neighbor dead while she was still living in Paris, Avesquín stands up and decides to leave the brothel. As he exits, he hears Madame Cier singing in her native French. She is singing verses (which Mallea, in a footnote to the story, says belong to Jean Cocteau) about the dangers of prostitution awaiting travelers, thus foreshadowing the story’s ending. Echoing Solar’s *Drago*, multiple languages heard in Buenos Aires of the time allude yet again to multiple national origins and international flags.

In “The Case of Xul Solar”, Beatriz Sarlo describes the Argentine cultural scene in the 1920s as revolving around the following main axes: “Firstly the question of nationality and cultural heritage was critical in a country in which the influx of thousands of immigrants had dramatically changed the demographic profile. Secondly, the relationship with Western Art and literature had to be clarified” (1994: 34).⁹ This clarification, indeed, is taking place in Solar’s art. According to Maria Bernardete Ramos Flores, *Drago* is a representation of Xul Solar’s utopian vision of Latin American unity in which the image of St. George fighting the dragon “functioned as a warrior shaman and healer of the ills of modern society” (2012: n/p). Ramos Flores goes even further to suggest that Xul Solar uses the dragon’s role to subvert the flow of colonization, and in so doing carries the message of the New World to the Old World. In its inversion of the traditional predicament of Buenos Aires (as a port looking towards Europe, its back to the provinces), Solar actually prioritizes the Argentine sources of this South American/New World message to Europe.

The Argentine subject, born in 1900, that Mallea discusses in “Conocimiento y expresión de la Argentina” is also “dotado de una vocación de artista” (Mallea, 1961: 70). While engaged in the observation of city life, “ve que esa multitud de la ciudad exhibe una desnaturalización de algo profundamente argentino” (Mallea, 1961: 75). This denaturalized city is merely “a sea of empty words” (Mallea, 1961: 75). Its threatening chaotic agglomeration, compared to the disintegrative forces of the Babylon trope, contributes to Mallea’s conviction that “lo argentino no está en ese cosmopolitismo ‘progresista’ y visible” (Mallea 1961: 75). Mallea not only uses the Babylon trope in relation to notions of contamination, but also in relation to those of cosmopolitanism as associated with material progress and modernity. In “Sumersión” also, all

⁹ Sarlo’s article is reprinted as “Fantastic invention and cultural nationality: the case of Xul Solar-” *Borges Studies Online*. J. L. Borges Center for Studies & Documentation. 14/04/01 (<http://www.borges.pitt.edu/bsol/bsfi.php>)

that Avesquín can observe in Buenos Aires is its material progress, covered with human silence and loss of pre-modern ‘authenticity’. At one point, the narrator describes Avesquín immersed in dreaming of the provinces of the Argentine interior, with its pampas, vineyards, and the Andes—all of which he had seen in “vagas oleografías” (Mallea, 1976: 102). In the 1934 essay as well, the submersion trope takes the Argentine subject underneath the superficial and chaotic layers of modernity and urban life. It is beneath those layers where the spheres of desired ‘authenticity’ lie.

Mallea writes in “Conocimiento y expresión de la Argentina” of groups of submerged men whose consciousness is driven by creative expression. It is an elite group, which, according to Mallea, shall bring salvation to the future of Argentina. This growing group is opposed “por las vías del espíritu a la confusión propuesta por la pródiga vida física de América” (Mallea, 1961: 79). The confusion, inherent in the Tower of Babel trope, is further problematic here, as is the adherence to nature that Mallea advocates, but that, in the end, cannot lead to the resolution of the Argentine crisis. Only those spiritually submerged people can carve a way out—and into the desired future. In addition to the gender exclusions of this select group consisting of men alone, resembling those exclusions in Rodó’s *Ariel*, Mallea resorts to an organic metaphor:

Son hombres sumergidos. Sumergidos como todo lo que permanece en estado de gestación; pero la dimensión de su ámbito subterráneo es mucho más rica y sonora que lo que resuena en la acústica de la ciudad, por sobre ellos. (Mallea, 1961: 78)

This elite group of kindred souls, Mallea writes in the conclusions to this essay, will help establish “la integración y armonización de un orden” (1961: 79). The aspiration of this group, resonant of the Babel trope as used in Victoria Ocampo’s homonymous essay (1920), is to create a harmonious order and to find an “original language” for a new and different world. Mallea’s conclusions are thus twofold, compelled to seek both a genuine self and a collective spirit. In an attempt to write in this desired new language, itself critical of both “Sumersión” and “Conocimiento y expresión de la Argentina,” Mallea inscribes his own efforts to belong to this messianic group. Indeed, Mallea’s texts employing the Babylon trope express an attempt for a re-origination and writing as a new (national) foundation. His texts are immersed in the conflict between the ideological principles belonging to the *criollo* national elite and those related to the social, political, and economic changes that the nation is undergoing at the time, provoked by the impact of immigration.

In Argentine literary history, there is an intriguing number of texts employing Babelic and Babylonian narratives, in which Babel and Babylon are not only objects of study, but also, and more importantly, tropes of encounter. In their configuration as cross-cultural metaphors, there are encounters of peoples, languages, natives, and “others,” some with a place and many displaced. As “contact zones,” to borrow Mary Louise Pratt’s term, the Tower of Babel and

Babylon metaphors are an elaboration of symmetrical—and much more often asymmetrical—contact between individuals and their discrepant histories. The Tower of Babel and Babylon tropes employed in literature and art produced in and about Buenos Aires play a significant part in the commerce of cultural borrowings and multiple influences across the axes of national and foreign literary productions. The use of these tropes by Argentine writers and painters, as we have seen in Mallea and Solar, raises important questions about the incongruities between these poles: Argentina and Western European metropolis, center and periphery, nation and cosmopolitanism, universalism and particularism.

Furthermore, The Tower of Babel trope suggests an inherent paradox. On the one hand, it points at a multiplicity of peoples and languages dispersed around the world. On the other, it refers biblically to a desire for one recuperated language and for one united people. By the same token, the Tower of Babel may be interpreted as a trope of one nation. Xul Solar's paintings are a case in point as they illustrate an apparent paradox between a multinational (immigrant) reality that he represented in forms of flags from a number of different countries, and that of his own nation and its flag, Argentina.¹⁰ In Solar's 1923 painting, entitled *Añoro patria*, the Argentine flag figures prominently on a boat situated in the center of this work. In 1925, upon his return to Buenos Aires from Europe, Solar painted *País*. Here the Argentine flag is accompanied by a number of other national flags. That same year, he made another painting, titled *Mundo*, and yet, this piece is almost identical to the one he titled *País*.¹¹

The difference between the Tower of Babel and Babylon tropes, as well as their respective distance and proximity to cosmopolitanism, is further complicated if we are to bring into discussion the twofold and often paradoxical nature of their interchange. That is to say, the Tower of Babel and Babylon tropes both stand for a certain ideological project, and, at the same time, stand for the impossibility of such a project. Mixture, and at times confusion, implied in Babel and Babylon tropes, often referred not only to languages, but also to political projects and ideological perspectives in the Argentine social reality of the 1920s and 1930s. Within this reality, Mallea's understanding of the Argentine nation was embedded in criollo sympathies, while Xul Solar's view was more ambivalent. Ocampo and Mallea's notion of cosmopolitanism was associated with upper-class travel and elite multilingualism—not with languages and flags

¹⁰ In "The Case of Xul Solar" Beatriz Sarlo aptly points out that the presence of flags underscores diversity as a central quality of Xul Solar's imaginary. According to the Argentine critic and cultural historian, flags speak the language of nationality and together with religious and magic signs they organize a universal space of cosmopolitanism that permeates the mixture of topics and myths in Xul Solar's paintings.

¹¹ Museo Xul Solar, Laprida 1214, Buenos Aires. In 2012 the Museum celebrated 125 years since the artist's birth. Recently there were retrospectives of Xul Solar's art internationally, most notably in 2006, in the Houston Museum of Fine Arts.

brought over by the working-class immigrants who sailed across the Atlantic in search of Argentina.

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BABILONIA ARGENTINA: COSMOPOLITISMO, INMIGRACIÓN Y LA CUESTIÓN DE LA MODERNIDAD EN XUL SOLAR Y EDUARDO MALLEA

RESUMEN: A través de la teoría crítica del cosmopolitismo el presente ensayo se enfoca en la modernidad urbana en el arte de Xul Solar y en dos textos de Eduardo Mallea, “Sumersión” y “Conocimiento y expresión de la Argentina”. Tanto el artista como el escritor se expresaron creativamente en una época en la cual la llegada de las olas inmigratorias fue percibida como una ‘amenaza’ a la pureza nacional argentina. Enfocándose en ciertas conexiones interdisciplinarias con el arte visual de Xul Solar, señalo que Eduardo Mallea en sus escritos enfatiza la ansiedad colectiva sobre la inmigración, mientras Xul Solar mantiene una postura al respecto más ambigua. El ensayo por lo tanto examina la modernidad urbana de Buenos Aires a la luz de sus entrelazamientos con inmigración y cosmopolitismo emergente, y a la vez se centra en las metáforas de la Torre de Babel y Babilonia en el arte de Solar, y aún más específicamente, en la escritura de Mallea.

PALABRAS CLAVE: modernidad argentina, cosmopolitismo, inmigración, E. Mallea, X. Solar.