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# The Truth Behind *Jusep Torres Campalans*: Max Aub's Committed Postmodernism

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**Abstract:** *Jusep Torres Campalans*, the apocryphal biography of an avant-garde painter published by Max Aub in 1958, should be read as a reflection on two matters of great importance to an exile of the Spanish Civil War: the relation between art (or literature) and politics, and the relation between fiction and reality. In spite of the fictional quality of its protagonist, *Jusep Torres Campalans* constitutes a serious history, commentary and critique of modernism that can be read as one of the first true samples of *postmodernism* in Spanish letters. Further, the book is a political statement in itself, closely connected with Aub's own position and experience as an anti-Francoist Republican exile at the height of the Cold War.

**Key Words:** Aub (Max), *Jusep Torres Campalans*, *Discurso de la novela española contemporánea*, modernism, postmodernism, Ortega y Gasset (José), Spanish Civil War exile

In 1958, the Spanish novelist and playwright Max Aub, living in exile in Mexico following his country's civil war, surprised his readers with an extraordinary work of non-fiction: the biography of Jusep Torres Campalans, a Cubist painter who had mysteriously disappeared from Paris at the beginning of the First World War. The book was a model in its genre, painstakingly documented and profusely illustrated, and its publication coincided with an exhibit at a prestigious Mexico City gallery of the painter's remaining work, which was as unknown and surprising as the man himself. Torres Campalans had been an important member of the Spanish avant-garde, a friend and contemporary of Picasso's who might well have been the very first Cubist, but until then had somehow slipped through the cracks of art history. Prominent intellectuals like Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes praised Aub's discovery of this missing link in the history of Cubism. Others even recalled having met the painter. As the reading public slowly discovered, however, the book had one minor defect: Jusep Torres Campalans never existed. Aub had quite simply invented him, convincing his influential friends to play along. And the art work was all his.

*Jusep Torres Campalans*, then, is an exceptionally well-orchestrated literary hoax. But it is more than that. I would argue that this apocryphal biography is in fact a highly political text that, as such, should be taken very seriously. In both its form and its content, the book offers a series of reflections on two matters of great importance to an exile of the Spanish Civil War: the relation between art or literature and politics, and the relation between fiction and reality. In what follows I wish to make two specific points. In spite of the fictional quality of its protagonist, *Jusep Torres Campalans* should be read as a serious history, commentary and critique of modernism, a critique that, moreover, manages to transcend its object. In fact, to the extent that this "meta-modernist" biography takes advantage of modernism's achievements while at the same time overcoming its limitations, it can be seen as one of the first true samples of *postmodernism* in Spanish letters. Secondly, I will argue that the text, with its playful crossing of generic boundaries, is a political statement in and of itself, closely connected with Aub's own position and experience as an anti-Francoist Republican exile at the height of the Cold War.

Aub was born in Paris in 1903 of a German father and a French mother, both agnostic Jews. At the outbreak of the First World War the family moved to Spain, where Aub would live for the

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next twenty-five years. As a writer, he came of age in the avant-garde circles mentored by José Ortega y Gasset, the great analyst of a “dehumanized” art and literature. For Ortega, modern art (especially abstraction) attempted to cut all ties with society, daily life, and human sentiment. Like many of Aub’s contemporaries, however, the course of history—the rise of fascism, the economic crisis, and the proclamation of the Second Spanish Republic in 1931—made Aub reconsider these aesthetics. With Alberti, Cernuda, and countless other intellectuals, he put himself at the service of anti-fascism. He joined the Socialist Party in 1929, participated in the state-sponsored cultural renovation of the Second Republic (1931–36), and actively served the Republic during the Civil War (1936–39) as well. As cultural attaché at the Spanish embassy in Paris, he commissioned Picasso in 1937 to paint the *Guernica*. In 1938, back in Spain, Aub worked with André Malraux on the film version of *L’espoir*, the latter’s Spanish Civil War novel. In 1939 Aub joined 500,000 Spaniards leaving his homeland for exile. In France, he was arrested after someone had accused him of being a Communist militant. The charge was false: Aub was a life-long Socialist and, while he sympathized with the Communists, he never became a party member. Nevertheless, he spent the following three years in prisons and concentration camps in France and North Africa, until he finally managed to escape to Mexico, where he would live until his death in 1972.

By the 1930s, Aub had abandoned the gratuitous and self-absorbed playfulness of the avant-garde in favor of an explicit political commitment, expressed in a specific brand of critical realism that he would perfect in the course of his thirty years of exile. Although Aub’s large oeuvre covers all major genres, his magnum opus is without doubt *El laberinto mágico*, a six-volume chronicle of the Spanish Civil War. Written between 1939 and 1968, this “Magical Labyrinth” is Aub’s corrective answer to the monolithic, strongly distorted history of the Civil War imposed by the Franco regime (1939–1975). This same regime banned his books, as well as those of the hundreds of other Spanish writers in exile. This was the exiles’ tragedy and, in a sense, their literary failure: They wrote for an audience that was out of their reach.<sup>1</sup> Politically, the Spanish Civil War exiles were even less fortunate, far too divided to reach a reasonable degree of internal unity. Their liberal-progressive project, moreover, modeled on the Popular Front, was hopelessly out of sync with a world torn by the Cold War. Aub was all-too-conscious of these failures, and if it were not for his strong sense of humor and irony, much of his work would be decidedly cynical.<sup>2</sup>

### A Cubist Novel

*Jusep Torres Campalans*, published after the fourth volume of *El laberinto*, when Aub had been in Mexico for 15 years, was unlike anything else Aub had written before—not necessarily because of the book’s transgressive blurring of generic boundaries, which is a characteristic running through all of Aub’s work. In his Civil War novels, which are presented as fiction, the historical characters in fact outnumber the fictional ones, and all narrated events are based on memory and meticulous research. Nor was it Aub’s first excursion into the area of literary forgeries: In 1934 he had published an apocryphal biography of a failed avant-garde poet, *Luis Alvarez Petreña*. Yet *Jusep Torres Campalans* goes much further. Its format and structure closely imitate that of the widely distributed “Taste of Our Time” series published in the 1940s and 1950s by the Swiss art-book publisher Skira (Soldevila 151). Aub’s book comprises seven separate sections, beginning with a “Prólogo indispensable” wherein the author (or—since this is a work of fiction—a narrator by the name of Max Aub) explains how he happened upon his subject: Aub met Torres Campalans—a reclusive but energetic 70-year-old, wary of contact with the civilized world—by sheer chance during a 1956 visit to Chiapas in southern Mexico. Also in the prologue, Aub proffers the first tongue-in-cheek caveat concerning the truth value of this work. “Trampa, para un novelista doblado de dramaturgo, el escribir una biografía,” Aub notes:

Dan, hecho, el personaje, sin libertad con el tiempo. Para que la obra sea lo que debe, tiene que atenerse, ligada, al protagonista; explicarlo, hacer su autopsia, establecer una ficha, diagnosticar. Huir, en lo posible, de interpretaciones personales, fuente de la novela; esoposar la imaginación, ceñirse a lo que fue. Historiar. Pero, ¿se puede medir un semejante con la sola razón? ¿Qué sabemos con precisión de otro, a menos de convertirle en

personaje propio? ¿Quién pone en memoria, sin equivocaciones, cosas antiguas? [...] ¿quién puede dar entera noticia de algo, si humano? [...]

Escribí mi relación, valiéndome de otros, dejándome aparte, procurando, en la medida de lo posible, ceñir la verdad: gran ilusión. (15–16)<sup>3</sup>

In the Acknowledgements, Aub lists many prominent art historians and intellectuals who helped with his research, including Picasso-expert Jean Cassou, Mexican writer and critic Alfonso Reyes, French novelist André Malraux, and even the great Cubist Georges Braque. The following section, entitled “Anales,” enumerates important historical events of the years between Torres’s birth (1886) and his disappearance (1914). Next comes the biography per se, followed by three long appendices: the painter’s “Cuaderno Verde” filled with reflections, diary notes, and aphorisms; two conversations between Aub and the painter in Chiapas shortly before his death; and a detailed catalog of Torres’s sixty known drawings and paintings.<sup>4</sup> Aub leaves it to the reader to make sense of this disparate collage of texts and materials. The amount of paratextual material is quite overwhelming, while the biography comprises barely more than twenty percent of the book. All sections have, moreover, copious endnotes, not all written by Aub, which in some cases contain whole essays in themselves. This chaotic, labyrinthine structure seems to discourage any kind of linear reading (Ugarte 140; Irizarry 97). Aub himself admits that piecing together Torres’s life felt at times like doing a puzzle (25); in his prologue the author/narrator suggests that the book has unwittingly assumed the structural traits of a Cubist work (16). As will be seen shortly, much of the book’s significance lies precisely in this dialectic between form and subject matter.

But the book’s unusual form directly undermines the biographer’s project, first questioning the notion of authorship, as well as those of order, hierarchy and selection. Repeatedly, it is unclear whether Aub is speaking or one of his sources; and some chapters, including the first, are almost entirely filled with quotes. The confusion mounts in the painter’s notebook, which—we are told—consists partly of copied sources, without any clear typographical indication to distinguish these quotes from the painter’s original thoughts. The endnotes, in turn, have at least five different authors and many times qualify, disqualify, or subtly contradict the main text. Probably the best example of Aub’s structural undermining of hierarchy and selection—and therefore of any notion of objective truth—are the “Anales.” The information they provide regarding events, individuals, and works is eclectic, arbitrary, and sometimes simply wrong. The poet Nicolás Guillén, for instance, is born twice, in 1902 and 1904; Roy Campbell’s year of birth is listed wrong, as 1902 (it should be 1903); and 1897 lists among the important births that of Luis Álvarez Petreña, the failed avant-garde poet created by Aub himself (Irizarry 97; Soldevila 152). Nor is it coincidental that the heading “literature” fails to distinguish between fiction and non-fiction, indiscriminately joining Hamsun’s *Hunger* and Pérez Galdós’ *Misericordia* with Freud’s *Traumdeutung* and Nietzsche’s *Zur Genealogie der Moral*. The illusory precision and selection of the “Anales” thus blend into their opposites; the section mockingly imitates similar chronological overviews routinely included in a painter’s “Life and Works.”

The suggestion of parody (evident in the editor’s compulsive need for detailed documentation) serves only to highlight the narrator’s ironic failure to pin his subject down: “Los documentos alcanzan el valor de clavos sujetando firmes la piel del cadáver abierto en canal,” Aub writes in his prologue, “cuando lo que importa es describirlo vívidamente” (15). Precise data surrounding the painter’s birth, given in full detail, include the page number of the civil register in which they appeared; yet Aub states simultaneously that the archives containing these data were burnt at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, twenty years before he started his research. Aub’s source in this instance is Jean Cassou, whose memory, the reader assumes, must be photographic (91). As Ugarte has argued, the book’s parodic documentary format questions the very possibility of capturing a life in text, of presenting it as a finished and uncontradictory whole (133). Instead the book opts for a disparate Cubist-like composition which claims to include all viewpoints at once, yet ultimately presents a distorted and—ironically—extremely partial picture. Torres Campalans continuously slips away from the reader’s grasp; he never stops being a mystery.

Indeed, for all its documentation, the putative biography is surprisingly limited in scope,

describing only the first 28 years of Torres's 70-year life: his childhood in a small Catalan town, his youth in Gerona and Barcelona, his meeting Picasso, and his eight years in Paris between 1906 and 1914. The character that emerges from the text is an anomaly full of contradictions. Torres Campalans is not only a Cubist but also a Catholic and an Anarchist, compulsively hygienic, neurotically methodical, and honest to the point of being rude. He believes in God, Man, and the Revolution, dedicating his life to painting without caring about success and is, out of principle, opposed to selling his work. Although he considers himself a hard-line political radical and is actively involved in Anarchist conspiracies and assaults, he refuses to put his art at the service of politics. Nor is he willing to sacrifice his artistic vocation to dedicate himself fully to political activism. He believes in social progress but thinks that the artistic quality of prehistoric cave paintings will never be matched, not even by Picasso. A self-made intellectual, he is convinced that the intellect should have nothing to do with artistic creation. "La pintura no debe decir nada," he writes, and: "No pintar ideas. Jamás [...]" (188, 193). Nothing bothers him more than the intellectualism of Juan Gris, whom he considers a bourgeois impostor riding the wave of the avant-garde purely out of self-interest (148–50).

These opinions, only suggested in the biography, emerge more clearly in the painter's "Cuaderno Verde," a disparate collection of diary notes, aphorisms, copied quotes, and general reflections on art, aesthetics, and the avant-garde. These reflections collectively comprise the manifesto of Torres's peculiar, tortured brand of modernism. For Torres Campalans the artist's highest virtue is originality; his worst sin, imitation. The notebook's first imperative, "No copiar," can also be read as a warning to any future biographer.<sup>5</sup> He believes that his times call for a new kind of art, different from anything produced before. "Pasarse en todo, y de todo," he writes; "[...] Buscar, no algo que no se haya hecho sino algo no hecho, sin hacer" (187–88). For Torres, art is autonomous, yet not disconnected from life: "Y nada del arte por el arte sino el arte por la vida, tras dar la vida por el arte" (209). Art should be separated from party politics, but its impact should be felt like an anarchist bomb. Naturally, Torres rejects the illusions of conventional realism, to which, in his opinion, even Matisse and Cézanne succumbed (190, 193). Yet for a long time he resists pure abstraction as well: "¡Anatema sobre Wassili Kandinsky! Eso: ¡a ningún precio! Que se dedique a escribir música. Y que no se diga que somos responsables: nosotros jamás dejaremos de ser hombres. *No hay derecho*. [...] El arte abstracto es bueno para los rusos—que huyen de su realidad, y de la de todos—, nunca para nosotros" (216–17).

For Torres, art comes from within the painter (194), has nothing to do with reason,<sup>6</sup> and is always true—both to the painter and to the world: "Si es arte," he proclaims, "es verdad" (231). The only way to tell this truth, however, involves distorting reality beyond recognition. Here the painter reveals the Anarchist in him: "Meter una bomba en el objeto, y que estalle," he writes; "Pintarlo entonces desde cualquier ángulo. (Que lo reconstruya el que pueda)" (197). "¿Cómo puede haber verdad sin mentira?" is the essential rhetorical question attributed to the non-existing Santiago de Alvarado that serves as one of the book's three lemmas (9). As will be shown shortly, the dialectic of truth and lies is fundamental to Torres's—and Aub's—aesthetics.

The biography and notebook end in 1914, a moment of severe crisis in the painter's life. After several years of increasing pessimism and disappointment, the outbreak of the First World War finally shatters all of Torres's political illusions: "Se van a la guerra como si tal cosa. [...] Ahí están, haciendo colas, como animales, esperando que les den de comer. Como si ser soldado fuese cosa natural. Como si no fuesen hombres. [...] Parece que nadie se da cuenta de lo que está sucediendo; ¡la primera guerra con las Internacionales en pie! ¿No es nada? [...] ¿No somos hombres? ¿Puede más ser francés, alemán o español, que ser hombre? ¿No se dan cuenta? [...] Tanto luchar, ¿para eso?" (242). The world, he feels, has gone insane, and there is nothing for him to do but to flee from it, as far as possible. He embarks for Mexico, travels to Chiapas, and is never heard of again—that is, until Max Aub runs into him forty-two years later, only to find that Torres Campalans has "gone native." He has been living in the jungle with the Chamula Indians, dedicating himself to leisure and procreation. Significantly, Torres's political disenchantment has coincided with his abandoning painting altogether. "¿Y no ha pintado o dibujado nada?" Aub

inquires incredulously. “¿Con qué?” Torres answers: “[...] Al fin y al cabo, como pintor fui un fracaso. [...] Dejé de pintar. [...] Por voluntad lo hice [...] Pintaba para salvarme, como espero salvar mi alma el día, que está cercano, de mi muerte. Salvarme en tierra presuponía hacerlo entre los hombres que, no me cabía duda, serían cada día mejores. Cuando me di cuenta de mi equivocación, renuncié” (268, 271, 276). From the vantage point of this artistic and ideological disenchantment, Torres’s assessment of Cubism is severe. “Hicimos otra cosa,” he admits. But nevertheless, he adds, “El querer inventar un idioma nos llevó—de vuelta—a los jeroglíficos. Lo que había de ser un nuevo lenguaje se quedó en signos que sólo los entendidos, los que estaban en el secreto, podían traducir. Hoy, la pintura, dejándose arrastrar, es una sociedad secreta para iniciados. Una masonería cualquiera, con sus maestros, sus grados 33, etc. A veces pienso que los imbéciles tienen razón. ¿Qué hicimos? Separar el arte de la naturaleza” (273–74).

### Settling Accounts with the Avant-Garde

It is in the critical assessment of modernism that this curious book transcends its fictional framework. As Dolores Fernández Martínez has shown, the apocryphal biography does present a surprisingly accurate account of the intellectual, cultural, and political circumstances in which Cubism was born, in spite—or maybe precisely because—of the fact that Torres Campalans himself is imaginary. As in Aub’s Civil War novels, the protagonists might be invented, but that does not mean that the world in which they live is not equally or more historically accurate than that portrayed in more conventional historiographies. And, much like Aub’s Civil War narratives, the life story of Torres Campalans serves to contest or remedy the repressions and silences of official histories. More than half of the “events” commemorated in the “Anales” section, for instance, are directly related to the history of labor protest—a history notoriously silenced under the Franco regime, and not his alone. The milestones recorded range from the Haymarket Riots and the first congress of the Spanish Socialist party to a long series of general strikes and Anarchist assaults. The immediate excuse for the historian’s pro-labor slant is the painter’s involvement in Anarchism; but placed in the context of anti-fascist exile, its significance is of course much greater.

In the same way that the biography presents Torres Campalans at the end of his life looking backward to evaluate the accomplishments and failures of Cubism, the book itself allows Max Aub to engage in a critical debate with his own avant-garde past (Oleza i Simó 116). Aub began settling accounts with the Spanish avant-garde soon after arriving in Mexico. He was particularly critical of the “dehumanized” literature analyzed in the 1920s by José Ortega y Gasset. In an unusually severe judgment, Aub charges Ortega in 1945 with having “castrated” a whole generation of potentially fertile novelists. Ortega, Aub writes, “produjo graves males irreparables” by teaching his disciples that form was more important than content, and that true art is by definition opposed to realism and popularity. Aub argues that, by contrast, Spanish art and literature have always been rooted in the popular, and therefore in realism (Aub, *Discurso* 81). According to this argument, what Ortega did was to send his pupils the other way, in effect driving them down a road of literary suicide. Ortega’s school is, for Aub, too intellectualized, too detached from social reality and too disdainful of its audience. In Aub’s opinion, the avant-garde—in which he includes Cubism, Expressionism, Dadaism, and Surrealism—simply reflected “la tremenda crisis del mundo occidental desde fines del siglo XIX hasta nuestros días.” Because of its anti-popular stance, however, vanguardism was bound to be short-lived, and to die “a manos de una realidad política encaminada a renovar la realidad social” (*Discurso* 85–86). Ortega, Aub states, never understood this. For Ortega, who in Aub’s view arrogantly despised the masses, the purely artistic and the popular excluded each other by definition. For Aub, Ortega’s praise of the “arte nuevo” directly derived from his inveterate elitism, rather than the other way around (86–88); consequently he confused the logical fact that new art forms are, at first, rejected by the majority of the audience, with the imperative that new art should always turn its back to the masses (93). Interestingly, Aub is no less critical of Surrealism, which in his opinion “iba empujado por

idénticos motores que los que llevaron a Ortega a sus *Ideas sobre la novela y La deshumanización del arte: El Romanticismo y el Modernismo*" (89). Aub links Surrealism not only with the avant-garde but also with fascism: In the end, all three movements place instinct above reason (89–90). For Aub, both Surrealism and Ortega's version of the avant-garde are tragically frivolous, self-absorbed, and sterile. In their aesthetics, their rejection of the audience, and their pretension to create an art independent from all social reality, he reads an unforgivable arrogance (*Discurso* 92; see also Oleza i Simó [115–17]).

Aub's criticisms of Ortega and the surrealists are, of course, overstated and unfair; Ortega himself underscored in *La deshumanización del arte* that his aim was to describe, not to prescribe. Aub's violent rejection of Ortega should be understood in the context of the Republican defeat and Ortega's ambivalent position vis-à-vis the Republic both before and during the Civil War, which for many Republicans was difficult to stomach. Be that as it may, however, one might wonder to what extent Aub's criticisms of the avant-garde apply to Cubism, and more specifically to the peculiar aesthetics of Jusep Torres Campalans.<sup>7</sup> As we have seen, the painter defends the autonomy of art from politics, intellectual reason, and any notion of usefulness.<sup>8</sup> But in no way is he advocating a *dehumanized* form of art. On the contrary, for Torres the human element is essential, as is art's grounding in reality. "Pinto por—y para—participar en el mundo," he writes. "No dejar nunca de tener un pie en tierra, aunque sólo sea un dedo," he warns himself later (202, 216). Hence, too, his initial rejection of Kandinsky and Mondrian (236). The modernism of Torres Campalans is, then, quite different from Ortega's. For Ortega, obsessed with ideas of social hierarchy, modern art serves in part as a tool to shift the philistine masses from the true aesthetes, inasmuch as the latter don't need the sentimental connection with human life to appreciate beauty in its purest form. In Ortega's opinion, modern art is necessarily elitist, and that is a good thing. Torres Campalans, by contrast, starts with Cubist aesthetics—"Un objeto quedará siempre mejor si se le retrata simultáneamente desde varios ángulos; el ideal: que se viera desde todos: como Dios lo hizo" (204)—to arrive at a radically opposed, egalitarian credo: "Lo que importa es la vida. Por eso hay que dar la misma importancia a todo y a todos los aspectos de las cosas, de los hombres. Darlos en conjunto, completos, procurando no olvidar nada. Por delante y por detrás, por arriba y por abajo. Una pintura total. Sin olvidar lo que nos funda: los objetos desde el punto de vista de Dios, que tiene mil ojos" (226).

Nevertheless, Torres coincides with Ortega on several important points. For one, he shares the philosopher's disdain for the audience, its taste, and its judgment. Torres's art is not narcissistic, but it surely could be called antisocial. At one point the painter confesses that he does not want anyone to see his paintings, since he only paints for himself (206). Contact with the audience is considered unimportant or negligible; and Torres knows full well that he is creating an art only comprehensible to a minority. Until 1914, he finds this unproblematic (227); only later in life does he identify his failure to reach a wider audience as the more general failure of the avant-garde. Finally, Torres's Anarchism-inspired aesthetics share in the irrationalism and fetishization of violence that Aub condemned in Surrealism and identified with fascism.

Now we can move back from content to form. To what degree does this fake biography, this "Cubist novel" itself, follow Torres's aesthetic tenets? In other words, how modernist is this book? The novel very obviously flaunts its avant-garde techniques, notably that of montage. Typically avant-garde, too, are its playfulness and self-referentiality. As already seen, however, the book deviates from the avant-garde, managing to combine formal experimentation and play with a strong grounding in realism and political commitment. As previously suggested, the fact that the novel feeds on modernism while also critically transcending it, could justify calling it postmodernist; for Joan Oleza, Aub is an "obligado pionero de la Postmodernidad" (120). Indeed, it initially appears difficult to find a better example of pastiche, nostalgia, and stylistic cannibalism than Aub's conception and actual execution of an entire oeuvre of Cubist art half-a-century after its heyday. And yet Aub's text has nothing of the "blank parody" or moral neutrality that Jameson associates with the postmodern pastiche.<sup>9</sup> *Jusep Torres Campalans* is anything but frivolous. There is no play for play's sake or transgression for transgression's sake, and the

novel's pervasive irony does not in any way compromise its political force.

Quite the contrary: Aub's novel in effect redeems the aesthetics of the avant-garde through an ironic distillation process that results in the miraculous extraction of what could be called an *ethics of emancipation*. As José-Carlos Mainer argues, Aub's alchemy thus salvages what are perhaps the avant-garde's only lasting legacies—formal freedom and the artist's autonomy: "Max Aub pensó [...] que las artes nuevas representaban una forma de inteligencia intuitiva, distinta pero certera, y que su apelación a la espontaneidad liberaba inéditas posibilidades críticas" (70). Not coincidentally, these are precisely the two values that Aub always refused to sacrifice for the sake of his political commitment, a refusal that provoked severe conflicts with his Communist friends. In May 1950, for example, he responds in his diary to Communist complaints about the lack of explicit political content in his work: "Pero, ¿qué te has creído? ¿Que soy un propagandista político o un escritor? ¿Qué me reprochas?: ¿que mis personajes se mueven por resortes sentimentales y no políticos? Pero, ¿en qué mundo vives tú? [...] Lo que sucede [...] es que juzgáis la literatura con criterio exclusivamente político. No os importa un comino la calidad. Basta que el autor sea comunista irreprochable para que lo que escriba sea bueno o, por lo menos, pasable" (*Diarios* 166). That it was Aub who could perform this rescue operation of the avant-garde's legacy of formal freedom and artistic autonomy was partly due to his own experience. After all, he himself was first liberated by the avant-garde and then pulled back into social reality by war and exile. His own avant-garde background allows him in *Jusep Torres Campalans* to strike a delicate balance between the sterility of pure formal play and the straitjacket of a dogmatic social realism.

This literary "third way" is also informed by Aub's strong views as to the writer's function in the mid-twentieth century. His antidote to what he viewed as Ortega's paralyzing arrogance is self-doubt and irony and, especially, a fundamental modesty which admits that history weighs more than the author's creative genius. In the late 1940s, Aub wrote a letter to a critic who had classified his work as existentialist, in which he declared his disagreement with the tenets of that philosophy. On the contrary, he said,

Me siento mucho más ligado a otro movimiento de las letras contemporáneas [...] donde se encuentran gentes sólo dispares en apariencia, como lo son, por ejemplo: Hemingway, Malraux, Ehrenburg, Koestler, Faulkner, O'Neill. Gentes que, desde luego, a pesar de sus esfuerzos no pueden pasar de reflejar la época. Con fe distinta, pero con fe. Un poco al modo de los cronistas de la Alta Edad Media, que tampoco debían ver muy claro el futuro. [...] A nosotros, novelistas o dramaturgos, sólo nos queda dar cuenta de la hora en crónicas más o menos verídicas. (*Hablo* 35–36, 40)

The dialectic of form and content described above is accompanied by a similar interplay between the protagonist and his biographer. As Ignacio Soldevila indicates, the key to this relationship appears on one of the last pages of the section in which Aub transcribes his conversations with the retired painter (153). Having said goodbye to Torres Campalans, Aub returns to his Chiapas hotel and, passing a hallway mirror, he notes: "Al pasar frente al espejo del gran perchero le vi andando" (*Jusep* 290). Indeed, Torres Campalans is Max Aub's mirror image in more than one sense. Aub is a writer who secretly paints; Torres a painter who secretly writes. The most significant move in Aub's life was from Paris to Spain; for Torres it was a move in the opposite direction. Aub's move, moreover, took place in 1914, the same year Torres disappears. More importantly, Torres represents Aub's road not taken. Torres replaces his avant-garde utopianism with disenchantment, isolation, and an abandonment of all creative activity. Torres Campalans initially believed that Cubism provided a way out; but when he realized that it was a dead-end street, he simply threw in the towel. Aub, by contrast, traded the avant-garde for a committed realism, never allowing his disappointments with reality to cut off his creative source. On the contrary, his exile is characterized by a feverish and intense literary production spurred by a set of political ideals that Aub refused to relinquish. This biography is only one example among many of his lasting commitment.



**Truth and lies**

*Jusep Torres Campalans* constitutes a political statement in other ways as well. Its fictions, interspersed with documentary facts, provide ironic commentary on the web of official lies that sustain a totalitarian regime or any government bureaucracy where texts—papers, records, files—assume the place of reality. Aub's experience in these matters was first-hand. As a political exile, his life and works were practically erased from the public record in Francoist Spain; whatever information was left was distorted beyond recognition (Aub, *Diarios* 432). In this sense Aub's fate was not different from that of his fellow exiles. But for Aub things were even more complicated, demanding constant struggle against his persistent but false reputation as a militant Communist or even a dangerous Soviet agent. This fiction, which caused his arrest in France, in 1939, and the subsequent years of imprisonment, resurfaced in 1947 and 1953, when the Mexican newspaper *Excelsior* published tendentious and outlandish reports on Communist conspiracies in which Aub was assigned a central role. Meanwhile, in 1951 a criminal record compiled by the collaborationist police of Vichy France sufficed for French authorities to reject Aub's request for a visa to visit the country of his birth. Aub, of course, was enraged; but this did not prevent him from perceiving the irony of his situation. In a personal letter to French president Vincent Auriol, he wrote:

Ya sé que estoy fichado, y que esto es lo que cuenta, lo que vale. [...] Es decir, que yo, mi persona, lo que pienso, lo que siento, no es la verdad. La verdad es lo que está escrito. Claro que yo, como escritor, debiera comprenderlo mejor que nadie. Es decir, que lo que vive de verdad son los personajes y no las personas. [...] Yo, Max Aub, no existo: el que vive es el peligroso comunista que un soplón denunció un día [...] Ése soy yo, y no yo, Max Aub, ése que yo conozco y con quien estoy hablando, y que con el mayor respeto le escribe. (*Hablo* 61)

The connections between this letter and the apocryphal biography published seven years later are self-evident, and explicit reflections on the dialectic of truth and lies indeed comprise an important part of Torres Campalans's Green Notebook.<sup>10</sup> Especially significant in this respect is the section entitled "Aesthetic," worth quoting at some length. "¿Qué es el hombre?" it inquires:

Lo han definido miles: el único ser que sabe que tiene que morir, que sabe qué hace, que escoge, que cree en Dios. Sin duda. Pero lo más: el único que miente. ¿Hay alguna virtud que asiente más la condición de hombre que decir algo a sabiendas falso dándolo por verdadero? Inventar mentira, y que los demás la crean. [...] Forjar de la nada. Mentir: única grandeza. [...] Ojo: mentir, inventar; no falsear—que es engañar, falsificar—[...] Que la verdad se vea al través, único modo de alcanzarla. [...] Darse a través de tangentes; que se huela lo cierto: no hay otra manera de entregarlo; única forma de la lealtad a nuestro ser; nos la dieron en propiedad. Diéronnos el dibujo, la letra, la palabra para mentir, aunque no queramos. [...] Puestos a mentir, hagámoslo de cara: que nadie sepa a qué carta quedarse. [...] La lengua, la pintura, mienten de por sí. Todo es fábula [...]. Nadie puede ser verdadero porque ¿quién sabe del auténtico ser? Queda el ingenio. El ingenio miente a derechas, imponiéndose, seguro, al mentidero [...].  
Mentir, pero no ser mentiroso. No engañar a nadie. [...] No creer jamás que los demás son bobos, al contrario: decir para iguales. Si se junta lo supuesto verdadero con lo falso, dar pistas, dejar señales para que todos hallen el camino del alma. [...] Mas—otra vez—ojo: mentir, no engañar; fingir, no falsificar; disfrazar [...], no falsear; inventar, no plagiar [...]. (228–30)

In the context of this fake biography, the reader cannot help noting the tongue-in-cheek self-referentiality of the foregoing text; after all, the whole book is precisely a cocktail of truth and lies in which Aub drops enough hints to sow some doubt in the reader's mind. Yet the statement can be read on a more serious level as a formulation of Aub's own aesthetics.<sup>11</sup> In an ironic, anonymous footnote to this section of the Green Notebook, it is suggested that Torres copied it from an unknown source; a likely candidate would surely be Aub himself. For Aub, the only way of getting to the truth, be it historical or personal, is not through serious, explicitly documentary texts that are invested with the authority of more or less repressive institutions. On the contrary, state-supported monolithic discourse is founded on the naïve assumption that texts can indeed represent or even replace reality itself. Aub, by contrast, proposes that truth is only attained through ironic, self-referential, realist *fiction*. Responding directly to the falsehoods spread by

Francoism about himself and his fellow exiles, Aub creates *Jusep Torres Campalans*: a fiction that is more true in intent and essence than those other fictions that control and limit his life.

In this way, as we have seen, *Jusep Torres Campalans* constitutes a rare sample of what one could call a politically-committed, realist postmodernism. This postmodernism is playful but no less powerful, confusing the reader yet leaving little doubt about its purpose. Fictional yet surprisingly real, it is, above all, critical. For Torres Campalans, after all, to create art is “convertir la verdad en mentira, para que no deje de ser verdad” (238).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Francisco Ayala, himself exiled in Argentina, perceptively addressed the question of the exile writer's audience in “Para quién escribimos nosotros,” an essay first published in *Cuadernos Americanos* in 1949. Ayala argued, among other things, that it was time for the Spanish exiles to leave their obsession with the war and Spain behind, to begin writing about their new surroundings, and for a wider audience. For a more extensive discussion of Ayala's essay, see Faber, *Exile* 167–69.

<sup>2</sup>Aub was well aware that to be exiled is to be displaced in both time and space and that, therefore, the exile can easily become a living anachronism, excluded from history itself. Indeed, much in Aub's life seems to have been out of sync with his time. He considered himself a Spanish writer but only learnt Spanish at age 11. Politically, even at the height of the Cold War he refused to choose between East or West. His sympathies for the Communists made him suspect in the eyes of everyone else. At the same time, his unveiled criticism of the Communists' methods and mentality cost him their friendship and trust as well. All through his forty-year exile, he consistently kept believing in a popular-frontist “Tercera Vía,” which he defined as a socialist economy in a liberal state structure. Still, Aub's most tragic lack of synchronization with history was related to his literary production. His novels, plays, and essays were written with a sense of urgency, and meant to be read by Spanish audiences—yet they were published in exile and barred from Spain by Francoist censors. Ironically it is only now, thirty years after his death, that Aub's works have begun receiving the distribution and recognition they deserve. The centenary of his birth (2003), was marked by a number of important conferences and exhibits about Aub in Spain, France, Italy, the U.S., and Mexico. Most of his works have now been reissued by the Fundación Max Aub in Segorbe (Castellón, Spain); and, more importantly, the Biblioteca Valenciana has begun publishing Aub's *Obras Completas* in a carefully edited, multi-volume series directed by Joan Oleza i Simó.

<sup>3</sup>All references are to the first edition of *Jusep Torres Campalans* (1958).

<sup>4</sup>The structure described here is that of the original Mexican edition. In the 1962 American edition the book's seven parts are presented in a slightly different order.

<sup>5</sup>The ambiguous copyright restriction placed at the beginning of the painter's diary also reminds one of René Magritte's 1937 painting *La reproduction interdite*, whose subject, like Aub's, refuses to show his face to the audience: He is standing in front of a mirror which reflects not his face but the back of his head.

<sup>6</sup>“Para pintar: no pensar. Dejarse ir, llevado por las manos. [...] No saber lo que se hace, hasta después. [...] ¿Quién pudiera pintar dormido! [...] Los hombres somos muy poca cosa civilizada y mucho de no sabemos qué, bárbaro e inconsciente. Querer vivir ateniéndonos únicamente a esa costra racional—a la que nos empeñamos en sacar tanto brillo—, es absurdo e inhumano. [...] Por eso, los pintores de verdad grandes son los que dejan entrever—no pudieron más—ese remolino que llevamos en las entrañas” (195).

<sup>7</sup>Two caveats should be made concerning this comparison. First, Cubism is a previous and, in a sense, “purer” form of avant-garde than Ortega's “dehumanized” novel. Secondly, painting, being visual, is fundamentally different from narrative. If, as Aub states, the avant-garde reduces art to “pura forma, pura técnica,” this can be defended “en actividades como la pintura o la música, donde la forma lo es todo,” whereas in literature it is bound for defeat (*Discurso* 67). On the other hand, as Irizarry has argued, *Jusep Torres Campalans* serves precisely to build a bridge between painting and literature: “Todo el libro está basado en la comunidad estética que existe entre las artes literaria y pictórica” (93). It is therefore legitimate to compare Aub's view of the literary avant-garde with his invention of Jusep Torres Campalans who, after all, strove to “[c]onvertir la pintura en escritura” (*Jusep* 190). As Pilar Sáenz writes, in *Jusep Torres Campalans* “pintar y escribir vienen a ser una misma cosa” (489).

<sup>8</sup>“Algunos quieren hoy un arte de tenedor, cuchara o cuchillo. Para ayudar a digerir cuanto antes. Que sea útiles—no útil—, que sirva. O que tienda, en sí, a hacer mejor a los hombres. La inocuidad e iniquidad de estos supuestos es obvia. ¿De verdad creen que *Edipo Rey*, *Hamlet*, *Las Meninas*, *la Sinfonía 41*, de Mozart, o *la séptima* de Beethoven—para no andar discutiendo—se hicieron con fines benéficos? / Todos los que suponen, a priori, que van a hacer una obra de arte útil, o sencillamente importante, no saben lo que dicen ni lo que hacen. Al arte hay que dejarlo solo” (227); “Si a algún imbécil se le ocurriera obligarnos a pintar ‘para el pueblo’ tendríamos que atenernos a lo digerido. Peligro de muerte. El arte va delante” (233).

<sup>9</sup>For Jameson, “Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs [...]” (17).

<sup>10</sup>“Mentir de cuando en cuando, para dar con la verdad. No hay otra manera. Copiar engaña siempre: vía muerta.

/ Dar la verdad por lo que no parece serlo" (197).

<sup>11</sup>Additional perspectives appear in Figueras, Grillo, Pérez Bowie, and Tortosa.

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