Chapter 2

Mapping Out the Modern: Rodó’s Critique of Pure Reason

Rationality [in Latin America] is not the disenchantment of the world, but the intelligibility of its totality.

Aníbal Quijano

The Cartesian logic of understanding the world by breaking it down into ever smaller units of analysis has never had great appeal in Latin America, where there has been a recurrent bias toward a holistic approach. The idea that to be truly free, to be “fully human,” individuals must be “open to the four winds of the spirit,” not bound by any single mode of apprehending reality, can be found in many early-twentieth-century Latin American texts. Generous, expansive, symphonic natures have long compelled Latin American admiration, the multitudes they were thought to contain eclipsing any contradictions. It is perhaps no coincidence that in Latin America there has not been the radical rejection of reason that occurred in Europe: Latin Americans saw Goethe and Tolstoy as inspirational, but not Wagner or Nietzsche; famously, they preferred Sartre to Camus. Maybe because rationality had never been raised so high, correspondingly there was no need to bring it so low. Instead, the haunting themes of twentieth-century Latin American discourse have been the integration of theory and practice; the reconciliation of reason and spirit; the claim that reason does not necessarily exclude passion or imagination or intuition; and the view that reason is one source among others rather than the fount of all knowledge. It is not just instrumental reason that was deemed to be inadequate, but any conception of reason as cut off from experience of life. In his famous essay of 1925 proclaiming that Latin American peoples would become The Cosmic Race
through the synthesizing energies of *mestizaje*, José Vasconcelos outlined an approach to methodology that was widely shared in Latin America at the time:

Only a leap of the spirit, nourished with facts, can give us a vision that will lift us above the micro-ideology of the specialist. Then we can fathom events as a whole in order to discover a direction, a rhythm and a purpose in them. Precisely there, where the analyst discovers nothing, the synthesizer and the creator are enlightened. Let us, then, attempt explanations, not with the imagination of a novelist, but with an intuition supported by the facts of history and science.3

The Latin American critique of pure reason has played itself out in many fields in Latin America: in literature (the “marvellous real”) and criticism (the “critical closeness” of Carlos Monsiváis); in philosophy, particularly in the idea that critique can be a basis for liberation and solidarity;4 in Liberation Theology, which sought to accommodate social science and theology; in educational theory, for example, Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of consciousness-raising; and in Che Guevara’s concept of the new man. In all these areas, reason was conceived as more encompassing and less absolute than instrumental reason. This rethinking of the role of reason is central to the alternative modernity sketched out in this book. It occurs in the work of all four intellectuals discussed, but the process began with the Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó (1871–1917), whose contribution to the collective endeavor of mapping out the territory of the modern in Latin America is hard to overstate.

In 1909 Rodó was hailed as “the thinker of our new times,” by no less an authority than the internationally renowned poet Rubén Darío, speaking from the lofty heights of his own exalted position as the first modernista.5 Darío’s endorsement may surprise many readers today, who—if they have heard of Rodó at all—are likely to think of him as a conservative throw-back to the nineteenth century rather than as a modern interpreter of the twentieth century. He certainly was not charismatic, like Darío or Martí, and Uruguay was not one of the major intellectual centers of the region, but even so he became, by common consent, “the most representative writer” in Latin America during the early twentieth century.6 The essay that made him famous, *Ariel* (1900), was referred to as the bible and conscience of Latin America for at least three decades, and it is still read today as a foundational text in the history of Latin American culture. He was the first Latin American writer to achieve public acclaim on intellectual grounds alone: large crowds accompanied his funeral procession