

## “Encajadas las formas”: *Avant-garde* Material Poetics in Manuel Altolaguirre’s “Poema del agua”

*Este ensayo analiza el “Poema del agua” de Manuel Altolaguirre con especial interés en las posibilidades metafóricas que implican la labor tipográfica del poeta y el legado poético y material de los movimientos de vanguardia que le precedieron. Teniendo en cuenta la importancia de los parámetros materiales e históricos que definen el momento de producción de cualquier texto literario y especialmente el énfasis de todas las vanguardias en lo material, una lectura tipográfica del “Poema del agua” ofrece una nueva y muy fructuosa aproximación a la poesía de Altolaguirre y de otros poetas de la Generación del 27. A través de esta lectura tipográfica, que descubrirá nuevas coordenadas exegéticas para la poesía de Altolaguirre, se hará manifiesta la presencia de las innovaciones metafóricas de escritores vanguardistas como Ramón Gómez de la Serna y Gerardo Diego en la poesía española posterior al tumulto artístico que fue la primera vanguardia.*

In the first section of his 1927 “Poema del agua,” Manuel Altolaguirre places a hidden spring among stones, a motionless sky, prehistory, “muros siempre” (*Poesías completas* 307). In this landscape forms are fixed. Three lines into the poem we read, “Encajadas las formas,” and the scene is set, the forms and shapes of all things are physically laid in place. Considering that Altolaguirre is perhaps best known for printing the early works of the poets of the Generation of 1927, it is worth remembering that both “formas” and “cajas” in Spanish are important objects in a traditional printer’s workshop. The former is the wooden frame in which individual lead characters are arranged to compose a page of text, while the latter, as upper and lower cases, are where letter forms are stored.

This link that I make between the line from the “Poema del agua” and typography is not gratuitous, for Altolaguirre was, in fact, a dedicated and prolific printer throughout his artistic life. His long career as printer and publisher is one facet to his creative literary personality while his poems are the other; each penetrates and nourishes its counterpart, as Julio Neira demonstrates in his admirable study, *Manuel Altolaguirre, impresor y editor* (19). For Andrew Debicki, “[Altolaguirre’s] interest in form and in the concrete embodiment of aesthetic meaning is also clear from his career

as editor and publisher" (28). The clarity of the connection between poetry and typography may be intuitive for Debicki, and Neira's book is very helpful in understanding Altolaguirre's work at the press, but this essay submits Altolaguirre's early poetry to an analysis that should make the connection explicit. A reading of Altolaguirre's poetry that takes into account his activity as a printer reveals new metaphorical resonances in his writing and offers new terms in which to consider the work of other poets printed by Altolaguirre and Emilio Prados, his partner at the Imprenta Sur, including figures like Federico García Lorca or Luis Cernuda. This essay will show that Altolaguirre's metaphorical inheritance from the historical *avant-garde*, especially his debt to Ramón Gómez de la Serna's *greguería* and Gerardo Diego's *imagen múltiple*, is conjugated in practice with his deep interest in typography, both as a craft and as an essential component of his poetic imagination. The "Poema del agua," published in ten numbered sections of varying lengths in the little magazines *Verso y prosa* and Altolaguirre's own *Litoral* in 1927, will serve as the site for this examination of typography and metaphor. This poem is a good point of synthesis for Altolaguirre's output since it was, at the time, the work with which he was most satisfied (*Epistolario* 81). In this analysis my aim is not to limit the possibilities for Altolaguirre's poetry or for the works of other poets of his period. Indeed, this essay underscores the ways that attention to the material parameters of a text and the aesthetics of a particular moment in history can offer new and enriched avenues of meaning. Juli Highfill's recent book, *Modernism and its Merchandise*, is an important step in the direction of understanding the Spanish *avant-garde* in terms of its fascination with material objects and material culture. But this understanding is even critical for reading works from periods less preoccupied with materiality. Textual critics like George Bornstein remind us that "any embodied form of a text is a contingent product of concrete historical and economic institutions rather than a transparent conduit of an author's unmediated words" (8); my analysis of Altolaguirre's "Poema del agua" attempts to keep this in mind and points towards the importance of materiality in Spanish poetry of the first decades of the twentieth century.

Even where Altolaguirre's work at the press confirms his great admiration for Juan Ramón Jiménez, his choices of fonts, his decisions about layout and numbering, of colour and paper quality, and his poetic praxis must be considered in the context of the material poetics of the historical *avant-garde* and the subsequent 'return' to tradition and away from the "ismos de avance" (Diego, "La vuelta a la estrofa") which Altolaguirre and his peers in the *Litoral* group consciously undertook in

the second half of the 1920's.<sup>1</sup> Specific characteristics of Altolaguirre's printing work like typeface and spacing will have to be postponed for future studies, but we may at least begin in this essay to examine the intersection of Altolaguirre's interest in typography with his relationship to the historical *avant-garde*. To be sure, Altolaguirre was never a convinced Dadaist or a late Andalusian Ultraist. Nor could he have been; born in 1905, Altolaguirre was too young to participate in the wilder manifestations of the early *avant-garde*. Instead, we should read his work in conjunction with his own contemporaries' theories about aesthetics and tradition, especially Jean Cocteau's 1926 book *Le rappel à l'ordre* and Gerardo Diego's 1927 essay "La vuelta a la estrofa," a sign of the general *gongorismo* of the moment. Altolaguirre's early work as both poet and printer develops in this context of recuperation of tradition, and through his correspondence and editorial decisions his allegiance to Cocteau and Diego is clear. These authors advocate a return to tradition (or a return of tradition) from the position of the *avant-garde*'s previous rejection of any kind of reverence for past practices. Any 'return' to tradition or order, however, implies a knowledge of the path away from it, a knowledge which Cocteau and Diego certainly possessed as active participants in the international *avant-garde* in the years before Altolaguirre's literary debut. To return the 'forms' to their traditional 'cases' (or something like them), one must be able to find them where they lie. This essay will perform some of this detective work, retracing the path Altolaguirre travels between the poetics of the *avant-garde* and the more 'traditional' poetry he and his peers produced in publications like the famous *Litoral*. The "Poema del agua" showcases the lasting impact of *avant-garde* material poetics in the poetry of Altolaguirre and other poets of the Generation of 1927.

The opening three sections of the "Poema del agua" first appear in *Verso y prosa* in March of 1927 under the heading "(Fragmentos)." The first reads:

Vetas. Rocas. Sonidos caminantes.  
 Suelo y techo rozando sus dos planos.  
 Encajadas las formas. Locas venas.  
 Con negros antifaces los colores.  
 Grupo blando. Las raíces bebedoras.  
 Muros siempre. Cimientos. La prehistoria.  
 Todavía más sonidos caminantes.  
 ¡Qué sumergida oscuridad tan dura!  
 Para el encuentro el tacto. Filtraciones.  
 ¡Oh las respiraciones contenidas!

Opresos miembros. Manantial. Herida.  
 Cita del agua. Luz. Diamante puro.  
 Cola del monte. Lengua de cristales.  
 Cal. Verde prado. Azul del cielo. (*Poesías completas* 307)

Altolaguirre's nouns are free from most syntactical obligations in this first section of the "Poema del agua," highlighting their materiality as isolated forms. The movement of the water in the poem is conveyed not through the movement of verbs but by rapidly shifting focus from one noun to another. Unlike much *modernista* or Symbolist verse, paratactic and sonorous as it often is, the "Poema del agua," especially in the first section, is a terse, densely punctuated, staccato list of objects and materials. The movement here seems to be that of water as it seeps from the igneous rock and solid ore deposits of high mountains, then travels from there in underground arteries, eventually gathering into clear streams and springs in the limestone-fertilized pastures of lower topographies. The long journey of water is told through the enumeration of the nouns which give it form. The poem's syntax isolates each noun and the poem itself, phonically plosive and visually dense, becomes a material object with as crisply defined physical contours as those of the nouns enumerated in it. The poem refers no true anecdote, for it lacks temporality, and indeed all of the moments of the water's journey to the plain are simultaneous. Without verbs or an evident chronology, the reader must posit the relationships of the objects as the text quickly moves from one noun to the next. Wolfgang Iser might well have been talking about this poem when he wrote, "the structured blanks of the text stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on terms set by the text" (1677).

According to Laurence Breyse-Chanet, "la preferencia de Altolaguirre por los sustantivos es una prueba de su confianza respecto al lenguaje, de su fe en la posibilidad de alcanzar la trascendencia gracias al verbo," even though "las palabras parecen quedarse más acá del vuelo del alma." (185-6). For Breyse-Chanet, Altolaguirre's nouns give form to his thoughts (185) and so we may read the opening section of the "Poema del agua" as the movement of the speaker's thinking from dark and immobile regions to fluid and bright verbal expression. A metaphor like "lengua de cristales" is especially appropriate for this kind of interpretation, which is perfectly valid considering the continuous treatment Altolaguirre gives to rivers, rain, and the sea in his work, and the running metaphors of life, death, and revelation operating on those terms (Breyse-Chanet 81-6; Valender, "Altolaguirre, Góngora y la poesía pura" 29). The recurring theme of the island in Altolaguirre's titles and images is also linked to the expression of

intimate mental experience (Breysse-Chanet 171). And so, says Breysse Chanet, in Altolaguirre words are like stones, together forming a bridge to the intimate space of *Las islas invitadas* (189-90). This kind of reading loses some of its traction as we come to the end of this section in the poem. If the water's movement from darkness toward the light communicates the poet's intellectual movement from obscurity and frustration to clear verbal fluidity, we might expect to see an opening of the syntax to correspond with the freedom achieved by the now rushing water. But the final lines are just as terse and densely punctuated as the first.

As an alternative reading of the first section of the "Poema del agua," I offer another set of metaphorical coordinates, one set in the area of typography and printing. Since Altolaguirre cares for words not only as a poet but as a printer (Breysse-Chanet 170) and "la identidad se funda con las letras, y las letras dominan el tiempo" (Breysse-Chanet 33), it makes sense to read Altolaguirre's poetry with typography and printing in mind. This connection between Altolaguirre's typographical work, materiality, and his poetry has caught the attention of critics ever since he published *Las islas invitadas* in 1926. Reviewing this book, Altolaguirre's own poetic role model, Juan Ramón Jiménez, wrote,

conciencia e inconciencia barajan sus encontrados planos con las páginas, en un juego de contrastes, saltante de sólida, de líquida, de fluida belleza contagiosa. Y luego, la piedra, el aire, el metal, la arena, el cristal; lo duro, lo claro, lo frío, están representados juvenilmente en el prismático azabache de estas islas invitadas, de colores, olores, gustos sorprendentes en lo negro. (54)

The page and the black ink are the sites of poetry in *Las islas invitadas y otros poemas* rather than any immaterial sphere. Later critics make the same connection between Altolaguirre's verse and materiality. Francisco Chica, for example, states that "sus versos tienden a materializar el ideal que Juan Ramón Jiménez expresa" as the seed of something eternal to be planted in readers' minds (222). For Juan Cano Ballesta, the intense and intentionally non-transcendent focus on objects inherited from the *avant-garde* allows Altolaguirre to put into practice his "brillante pirotecnia metafórica" in the "Poema del agua" (7). Vittorio Bodini describes Altolaguirre's poetry as similarly concerned with materiality and presence rather than with the disembodied search for transcendent unity. He makes a suggestive reference to typography, writing that Altolaguirre's poetry "conserva todo su peso terrestre, y hasta diríamos, el peso de plomo de sus letras tipográficas" (Bodini 98).

Altolaguirre's first foray into the literary world, as publication designer, printer, editor, and author, was the little magazine *Ambos*. In this publication we see the connection between Altolaguirre's interest in typographical materiality and the historical *avant-garde*. *Ambos* is also by the final issue a record of Altolaguirre's assimilation of the "rappel à l'ordre," or the renewed interest in tradition appreciable in Spanish and French poetry generally by the second half of the 1920's (Carmona 13, 28, 31). In the first issue of the magazine Altolaguirre publishes "Tejados." Unremarkable as literature, it is nonetheless an interesting document of Altolaguirre's aesthetic preoccupations and the place of typography in his literary imagination. The plentiful white space in which the text is set and the calm and unhurried tone of the presentation contrast with earlier *avant-garde* magazines like *Cosmópolis*, *Cervantes*, *Grecia*, *VLTRA*, or even *Horizonte*, the flagships of Spanish Creationism and Ultraism. In "Tejados," the influence of Ramón Gómez de la Serna's *greguerías* is evident in the visual metaphors comparing city windows to obituaries (referencing the long rectangular layout characteristic of this genre) and the rooftops of the skyline to a long repeating series of the letter 'N.' In fact, Altolaguirre even published some of Ramón's *greguerías*, as well as reviews of two of his books, in the same issue of *Ambos* in which "Tejados" appeared. *Avant-garde* metaphor in *gregueristic* form, typography, and even a passing reference to Dada come together in this text at the beginning of Altolaguirre's literary career.

Despite the fact that Altolaguirre is not an iconoclastic poet of rupture and irreverence, as many of his immediate predecessors in the *avant-garde* were, his poetics and his typographical sensibilities sustain and complement one another in just the same way. We can see this here in the text of "Tejados" as well as in Altolaguirre's comments on *Ambos*. Many years after the end of *Ambos*, Altolaguirre calls the magazine the simultaneous flowering of his life-long interest in printing and his early literary inclinations, a publication where "las más avanzadas expresiones estéticas" left their mark (*Obras completas* I, 38-9). As a printer, Altolaguirre was keenly aware of one of the facets of writing that allowed the *avant-garde* spirit to form a coherent poetic praxis: textual materiality. In fact, as Eugenio Carmona has amply shown, *Ambos* was the (somewhat naïve) typographical and poetic crossroads of the *avant-garde* and the impending juanramonian aesthetics of 'pure poetry' that would dominate the Generation of 1927. While it is important to remember that many poets continued publishing work in line with the aesthetics of *ultra* and the first *avant-garde* (see Anderson 348-9), Julio Neira explains the mixed heritage of the poets of the second half of the 1920s who have since entered the

canon: “perdida la capacidad de sorpresa del ultraísmo, la poesía española va a remansarse en un magnífico equilibrio entre vanguardia y tradición que la caracterizará durante el resto de la década” (45).

The “Poema del agua” provides an example of Altolaguirre’s well-documented preference for noun-rich poetry, as mentioned above (Breysse-Chanet 185-6). As we saw, the first of its ten sections in unrhymed hendecasyllables traces the path of underground water through rocks and roots and eventually up to the surface, all without conjugating a single verb in its fourteen lines.<sup>3</sup> Where verbs do appear they take gerund or participle form, functioning as side-kicks to the much more powerful nouns. Many of these nouns carry a specific set of meanings unique to Altolaguirre’s poetry. Critics like Laurence Breysse-Chanet, Gabriel Insausti, and María Luisa Álvarez Harvey have explored these special connotations, often in the interest of elaborating Altolaguirre’s connection to the perceived popular vein of Andalusian poetry of the 1920s exemplified for many by Lorca and Alberti, or in terms of Altolaguirre’s own famously genial personality. Insausti makes a valuable attempt to distance critical appraisal of the poet’s work from nostalgic remembrances of his personality, but even his article on metaphor in Altolaguirre is primarily interested in the poetic voice’s reflection in mirror images, finally resulting in “la soledad de Narciso,” and ultimately identifying Altolaguirre’s personality with the poetic voice (74). What interests me here is not the metaphorical weight given to nouns in these critics’ treatment of the entirety of Altolaguirre’s output, though the contributions of Breysse-Chanet, Insausti, and Álvarez Harvey are, doubtless, valuable to understanding the poet’s aesthetics as a whole. Rather, I should like to consider the effects of the frugal syntax in which Altolaguirre places his nouns, isolated in grammar and punctuation as they are, and I shall also offer a new metaphorical reading of them grounded in typography as an alternative to the ones discussed by Breysse-Chanet.

Reinforced by the river’s “márgenes” (*Poesías completas* 308) and “mensajes” (310), the legitimacy of a typographical reading of the “Poema del agua” in particular is strengthened as the most explicitly *printerly* metaphor of the whole poem rounds out the tenth and final section. Here, water in the form of a dusting of snow spreads over asphalt like a “fina página brillante” (314), possibly echoing the *ultraísta* poem by Pedro Garfias in which, “sobre el paisaje desnudo / el silencio se extiende como una / página” (in Bonet, *Las cosas se han roto* 207). Thanks to Breysse-Chanet’s observation that Altolaguirre’s poetry is extraordinarily dense in nouns, the grammatical manifestation of material objects, we may read them metaphorically in conjunction with the typographical materiality that

so many have underscored in Altolaquirre's work. In addition to the "cajas" and "formas" mentioned at the outset of this essay, a fresh spring of water, the apparent subject of the poem, might be thought of as a "fuente," both "spring" and, in the typographical lexicon, "font." With printing now at the fore of our thinking, the words "vetas" and "rocas" of the first line of the "Poema del agua" become open to being read as typographical references to the Greek letters 'beta' (as homophone to 'veta') and 'rho,' as well as the Spanish letter 'ka.' Likewise, the phrase "sonidos caminantes" gives us an elegant metaphor for the phonetic alphabet, letterforms stretching across a page. At the same time, of course, it conveys the muffled sounds of water flowing underground.<sup>3</sup>

A "veta" is a vein of crystallized minerals or ore running through the rock around it, differentiated compositionally and visually from the surrounding material. In this poem especially, rather than a "prueba de su confianza en el lenguaje" (Breyse-Chanet 185), Altolaquirre's isolation of the noun, alone behind its period mark, opens the word up to multiple metaphorical possibilities. Free of syntactically imposed semantic obligations, the isolated noun offers up a multiplicity of meanings. In the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* (DRAE) we find that a "veta" is a "faja o lista de una materia que por su calidad, color, etc., se distingue de la masa en que se halla interpuesta" (DRAE 2293). More specifically, it is often a "filón metálico" (2293). As a common equivalent of "vena," a "veta" might even be a "conducto natural por donde circula el agua en las entrañas de la tierra" (2279). The DRAE also gives "inspiración poética, facilidad para componer versos" as a definition for "vena" (2279), and the corresponding "aptitud de alguien para una ciencia o arte," for "veta" (2293). All of these readings of "vetas" are admissible in this poem given the word's isolation in syntax. Even in the unproductive pursuit of a strictly denotative reading, at least two meanings for the term, as a mineral vein or an underground waterway, are literal possibilities. Breyse-Chanet would likely opt for one or both of these last readings of "vetas," having interpretative recourse to the abundance of metaphors involving earth and water throughout Altolaquirre's work, but her assertion that the isolated nouns in this poem are proof of Altolaquirre's confidence in language stands on shaky ground. The relative isolation of each noun, often bare of modifiers and unconnected to other nouns by verbs, brings us into the realm of material forms but also allows those forms to take on the metaphorical shades of many possible referents. And thus, thinking in terms of typography, while acknowledging and including all of the possibilities mentioned above, we may read the dark line of ore running through paler rock as a visual



metaphor for black letters tracing their path across the white of the printed page.<sup>4</sup>

As sky and earth rub their separate planes together, “Suelo y techo rozando sus dos planos,” ink comes to paper, just as flowing water, nearing the threshold between stone and air, moves inexorably towards the surface.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, a manual platen printing press, like the *minerva* Altolaguirre and Emilio Prados used for their Imprenta Sur in Málaga, operates by quickly pressing an inked block of metallic letterforms into the flat plane of a blank sheet of paper. In the next line, the phrase “Encajadas las formas,” as I suggested at the beginning of this essay, evokes letterforms as they are organized in their drawers and boxes in the *chibalete*, the printer’s cabinet for holding metal type. It could also refer to the solid forms of the earth and the predetermined shape that water must take as it courses through the cracks in the stone before finding unstructured freedom on the surface. “Locas venas,” might speak to the irregularity of the geological patterns, the quickness of the moving water, or also to the heightened heart rate of a printer hard at work at his press.<sup>6</sup> While the water is underground no light touches the scene and so colours are deprived their expression, “con negros antifaces[,] los colores” are hidden in the dark. As the water reaches surface freedom, colours abound in the last line of section I: “Cal. Verde prado. Azul del cielo.”<sup>7</sup> Of course the bright white of the limestone, the green of the meadow, and the sky’s blue, in their typographical presentation, are still hidden behind their “negros antifaces,” the ‘black masks’ of printed letterforms.

Rather than press a typographical metaphor as a possibility for every image in the “Poema del agua,” I should now like to stress the visual foundation of many of the metaphors I have mentioned thus far. The line reading, “con negros antifaces los colores,” in particular may launch an exploration into their construction. When we read this line as a typographical metaphor we must pay close attention to the subtle visual irony of printing the word “green,” for example, in black letters.<sup>8</sup> Altolaguirre’s visual metaphors, much like many of Ramón Gómez de la Serna’s *greguerías*, depend upon the visual recognition of the physical affinity between two objects, or the simple irony sometimes involved in the most every-day sights when considered from a new perspective. As a reader comes to witness the visual affinity between the two terms in a *greguería*, a cognitive or spiritual affinity comes to light as well. We might even re-write Altolaguirre’s line in the style of a *greguería*: “Cuando escribimos ‘verde’ o ‘rojo,’ les ponemos negros antifaces a los colores.”

Altolaguirre was familiar with Ramón’s *greguería* and published a selection in the third issue of his magazine *Ambos*, including this one: “Los

pimientos tienen el aspecto de ser las lenguas gordas de la tierra, a veces picantes lenguas de verdulera” (Gómez de la Serna, *Ambos*).<sup>9</sup> Ramón’s importance to Altolaguirre should be evident from the prominent place accorded to him also in the very first issue of *Ambos*. Writing on Federico García Lorca, Altolaguirre would later acknowledge the debt that all Spanish poets have to Ramón and his *greguería* (*Obras completas* I, 290-1). The *greguería* is, for Manuel Durán, “el género más típico y representativo de la vanguardia” (117). Luis Cernuda likewise insisted on the vital importance of Ramón’s *greguería* to the 1927 poets, including Altolaguirre. And, as James Valender notes, metaphors like *greguerías* appear throughout Altolaguirre’s “Poema del agua” and his other early poetry (“Altolaguirre, Góngora, y la poesía pura” 28). Such is the extent of their presence that Juan Manuel Bonet, following Cernuda, is able to call Altolaguirre “ramoniano” and his early poetry “gregueriza” (“Soledades pintadas” 331). In section V of the “Poema del agua,” for example, the foaming water trailing the pylons of a river’s bridge turns into flower petals in Altolaguirre’s imagination, a visual transformation perfectly at home in the *greguería* form. Consequently, the bridge pylon itself becomes the buttonhole on the lapel of a man’s suit, while the banks correspond to the surrounding fabric, and the flowing river takes on the character of the flower’s stem (*Poesías completas* 311). More succinctly, single phrases in Altolaguirre are sometimes perfect *greguerías* in themselves. In section VI of the “Poema del agua” we find this one: “Mienten las sumergidas ramas, cuando / sin ser raíces brotan bajo el suelo” (*Poesías completas* 312).<sup>10</sup>

Brevity and visuality are hallmarks of Altolaguirre’s poetry just as they are of the *greguería* or the historical *avant-garde* in general (Cernuda 407, 411). Language and visual beauty were inseparable for Altolaguirre, an association attested by his appraisal of Gregorio Prieto’s artwork. Altolaguirre wrote that each drawing was a “frase de una sola letra.” He continues to say that Prieto’s drawing amounts to a “caligrafía impronunciable” (*Obras completas* I, 386). In this text from 1931, Altolaguirre praises the instantaneity of the impression of Prieto’s work, wishing poetry might achieve the same “simultaneidad de impresiones” (*Obras completas* I, 387). Altolaguirre aspired to this kind of visual simultaneity in his poetry, which, before I return to a discussion of the “Poema del agua,” I shall take up in another brief poem. Illustrative of the *greguería*-type metaphor in his work, “Sin marinero” appeared in Altolaguirre’s book *Las islas invitadas y otros poemas* in 1926.

Sin marinero,  
ojo sin niña, del mar,

mi barca dentro del puerto.

Yo en el monte.

Sin pestañas,  
ojo sin niña ni remos. (*Poesías completas* 294)

“Yo,” as the speaking subject in this poem, is explicitly absent. The scene is observed either from the height of the “monte” or from some other perspective.<sup>11</sup> The basic metaphor of this short poem is a visual one, centered on the image of the human eye. A small rowboat with neither oars nor rower looks, from above, like an eye with no pupil or lashes. Similar to the figuratively variable metaphors from the “Poema del agua” which I shall consider next, and, in fact, duplicating the oar/eyelash metaphor from section III of this work (*Poesías completas* 308), the metaphor of the eye’s pupil for the absent rower in this short lyric presents a third dimension beyond the two terms, tenor (rower) and vehicle (pupil), of a simple metaphor or a *greguería*. The third term, in this case, is the ‘girl.’ “Niña” may mean ‘girl’ or the pupil of the eye, and in this case both meanings come to bear on the poem. The absence of the speaker (as absent “marinero”) becomes the missing pupil of the eye. Through the dual meaning of “niña,” a girl appears in the boat in her own (and the accustomed rower’s) absence. The terms of the metaphor, with the anatomical “niña” as vehicle for the absent rower, the tenor, here become inverted and mixed. “Niña” may be read as ‘girl,’ making this term the vehicle for a referent which was already not literal but metaphorical; the pupil of the eye takes the place of the tenor. In a traditional metaphor, as I.A. Richards defined it, the tenor is the literal element. The inversion of this metaphor produced by its three-term structure means that by the final line, a human ‘girl’ sits in the place of the tenor, for there truly is no girl present in the scene as a literal element. Thus, in the last two lines, the metaphor curves back on itself, and the eye itself, explicitly as “ojo” and not as “barca,” lacks oars. These extra nuances would not have been possible had Altolaguirre chosen ‘pupila’ over “niña” to refer to the eye’s pupil.

This interplay between disparate elements produces new metaphorical effects beyond a two-term relationship, as we have seen in the variability of the typographical metaphors in the first section of the “Poema del agua.” With similar metaphorical variability, the shepherdess’s song in section IV becomes “ondas de vidrio,” mixing together the invisible ripples of the air produced by her voice with the bird’s calls, the beating of

their wings, the undulations in the water, the girl's reflection therein, and her voice's echo on the cliffs.

Arrodillada, mírase en el río  
 obteniendo por toda compañía:  
 ecos de su figura en los cristales  
 cuantos reflejos de su voz en rocas,  
 alegre más que el canto, confundido,  
 de las aves del alba, con sonoras  
 ondas de vidrio que se alejan suaves. (*Poesías completas* 310)

Breyse-Chanet dutifully documents Altolaguirre's metaphorical uses of water, concluding that in *Las islas invitadas y otros poemas* and the "Poema del agua," water in its various forms serves as a metaphorical mediator between life and death (82-3). Noteworthy, however, is the fact that the girl's reflection in the stream, "ecos de su figura en los cristales," is matched by the 'reflections' or echoes of her voice off the stone of the surrounding landscape. She is happier than the mixing songs of the birds, which recall the "longs échos qui de loin se confondent" of Charles Baudelaire's arch-famous sonnet "Correspondances" (40). Again, as a challenge to the kind of reading of the "ondas" that would have us fix their metaphorical tenor in the water, we see here that the referent is multiple. The "sonoras / ondas de vidrio" are as much products of the motion of the birds' wings as they are issuings of the birds' beaks, echoes of the shepherdess's singing, or ripples in the water (Valender, "Altolaguirre, Góngora y la poesía pura" 29). The hyperbaton operating on "confundidos" provides an elegant intersection of semantics, syntax, and metaphor. The poetic achievement in these lines consists not in the neat fixity of the metaphorical value of "cristal" or "ecos" as references to the water or the air, but in the swinging cognitive motion between the terms required of the reader. Rosa Romojaro duly notes this kind of "ambigüedad reversible" between the two terms in many of Altolaguirre's metaphors, which she derives in her 1996 article, not from the historical *avant-garde*, but more remotely from the baroque metaphors of Luis de Góngora (432).<sup>12</sup>

The "Banderas de aluminio," or the "Curvos torsos," in section VIII are similarly indeterminate metaphors (313). Since Altolaguirre isolates these terms by leaving them free of any syntax beyond the noun clause, they may be read in myriad ways. In the context of the moored boats in the approaching storm portrayed in this section, the 'aluminum flags' might be banners stiffened in the gathering wind, or even glimmering metallicly as they are soaked in the rain. The metaphor might also refer to the gray

clouds on their approach, the clang of thunder (often mimicked with a baking sheet or pots and pans), or even the tinny sound of an emergency siren in the port, a kind of sonic warning flag. Likewise, the 'curved torsos' are those of the hunched sailors in their cabins and simultaneously the personified hulls of the boats in harbour. Altolaguirre shifts perspective here to achieve novel results by applying adjectives in deft (dis)harmony, as in "náufragas olas" (313).

The juxtaposition of disparate elements, or terms that share some hidden affinity, is a technique inherited from closer sources than Góngora's baroque metaphors, though, as Francisco Chica writes, the "Poema del agua" is a handy example of the commingling of *gongorismo* and the international *avant-garde* in the Generation of 1927 poets (208-10). In the case of Altolaguirre, this technique derives largely from Ramón's *greguería*, and indirectly from Cubist collage and even from the 'destruction of syntax' championed by Futurist founder F.T. Marinetti. Thus, just as Marinetti conveys the aggression and speed of man with his combination "uomo-torpediniera" (47), Altolaguirre's image of the men shifting in their bunks or seats with the motions of the stormy waters highlights an affinity in juxtaposition between the sailors and their dice. The lines, "Dentro de los barcos / hombres y dados cambian de postura" (313), confer on the hapless sailors the random tumbling of dice by bringing men and dice so close together in syntax. The truncated syntax that Marinetti advocated in 1912 would be little different in effect (47): 'Dentro de los barcos / hombres-dados cambian de postura.' Altolaguirre's line is more conventionally verisimilar, but the cognitive effects of the proximity of "dados" to "hombres" are the same as in Marinetti's hyphenated double noun. At the same time, it is impossible to tell whether the men and dice move erratically due to the rocking of the boat in the storm, or whether these lines portray an atmosphere of relative normalcy inside the boats, some men turning in their sleep, others entertaining themselves with games. The line might also be read as a metaphorical transformation of the men into potential victims of chance in a chaotic world. Again, multiple readings are simultaneously possible.

The immediate source of Altolaguirre's metaphors in the interpretatively variable "Banderas de aluminio" or the "Vetas" discussed above is, however, most likely not to be found in Marinetti's "Manifiesto tecnico della letteratura futurista" but rather in the work of a poet much closer to the Spanish *avant-garde*, Gerardo Diego. Diego's concept of the *imagen múltiple* certainly owes much to Gómez de la Serna's *greguerías*, but, as should be evident in my treatment of "banderas de aluminio," for example, the possibilities of this kind of metaphor go beyond the

*greguería's* usually quite simple linking of two elements. Gerardo Diego's *imagen múltiple* is indeterminate, allowing for many possible referential destinations for each image. Each of the visible vehicles corresponds to many possible tenors, and so, as we saw with some of Altolaguirre's metaphors above, meaning can never be pinned down.

Rosa Romojaro concludes that the "desdoblamientos" (432) of metaphorical elements in Altolaguirre lead to dual readings, semantic reversibility between two poles. In many cases this is exactly what happens, precisely in the manner of a *greguería*. Neither term takes the hierarchical precedence (tenor > vehicle) characteristic of simple metaphor. But as we have seen in the many metaphorical possibilities for "vetas" or "banderas de aluminio," for example, often a single word can operate as tenor or vehicle in a constellation of connotations, far beyond the sky-water duality put forth by Romojaro.

This semantic indeterminacy is the territory of Diego's *imagen múltiple*, which he defined in the Ultraist magazine *Cervantes* in 1919:

1<sup>º</sup> *Imagen directa*, esto es, la palabra. La palabra en su sentido primitivo, ingenuo, de primer grado, intuitivo, generalmente ahogado en un valor lógico de juicio, de pensamiento...

2<sup>º</sup> *Imagen refleja o simple*, esto es, la imagen tradicional estudiada en las retóricas.<sup>13</sup> La imagen evoca el objeto aludido con una fuerza y una gracia renacidas...

3<sup>º</sup> *Imagen doble*. La imagen representa, a la vez, dos objetos, contiene en sí una doble virtualidad. Disminuye la precisión, aumenta el poder sugestivo. Se hallan aisladas en los clásicos. Los creacionistas las prodigan constantemente.

4<sup>º</sup>, 5<sup>º</sup>, etc. *Imagen triple, cuádruple, etc.* Advertid cómo nos vamos alejando de la literatura tradicional. Estas imágenes que se prestan a varias interpretaciones serían tachadas desde el antiguo punto de vista como gravísimos extravíos, de ogminidad, anfibología, extravagancia, etc. El creador de imágenes no hace ya prosa disfrazada. El creador...empieza a crear por el placer de crear (poeta-creador-niño-dios), no describe, construye; no evoca, sugiere; su obra apartada va aspirando a su propia independencia, a la finalidad de sí misma.<sup>14</sup> Sin embargo, desde el momento en que pueden ser medidas las alusiones y tasadas las exégesis de un modo lógico y satisfactorio, aún estará la imagen en un terreno equívoco, ambiguo, de acertijo cerebral, en que naufragará la emoción. La imagen debe aspirar a su definitiva liberación, a su plenitud en el último grado.

*Imagen múltiple*. – No explica nada; es intraducible a la prosa. Es la Poesía, en el más puro sentido de la palabra.<sup>15</sup> Es también, y exactamente, la Música ... todo valor discursivo, escolástico, filosófico, anecdótico, es esencialmente ajeno a ella. La música no quiere decir nada... (“Posibilidades creacionistas” 26-7)

Gerardo Diego put his theory into practice in two books from the period, the appropriately titled *Imagen* from 1922 and *Manual de espumas* from 1924. In the former, Diego conveys in the poems as well as in notes and epigraphs his aesthetics of the *imagen múltiple*, even reproducing some of the text I have cited above (*Obra completa* 101). Some examples of the suggestive *imagen múltiple* from the book: “Para apagar mi sed / fumé todas las islas.” (107); “Pobre corazón mío / Hoy no le he dado cuerda” (117). If we take one of these *imágenes múltiples*, for example, the one involving clocks and hearts, and compare it to the *greguería*, we may see how the metaphorical referent is disperse. The metaphor of the heart as a kind of clock has had many iterations, from Poe’s “Tell-Tale Heart” to the popular phrase referring to the heart of an unhealthy person as a “ticking time bomb.” We might fashion a *greguería* on this old metaphor, writing, for example, “El corazón es un reloj; cuando dormimos le damos cuerda.”

What sets the *imagen múltiple* apart from the *greguería* is the multiplicity of possible terms. Today, say Diego’s lines, the speaker has not wound his clock-heart, but there is no telling in what this operation might consist. So indeterminate and scattered are the available meanings that we may easily posit the unconventional reversal of the trope as the most simple of many possibilities: this simplest reading has the speaker holding his stopped watch, noting that it has ceased to operate, and substituting ‘heart’ for ‘pocket watch.’ The usual metaphor of the heart as a kind of clock is also present; its winding, of course, is what suggests any number of actions not taken by the speaker (sleeping, eating, visiting a lover, meditation?). The scattered printing of the poem underscores the disparate metaphorical possibilities and the indeterminacy of the *imagen múltiple*. Throughout *Imagen* Diego breaks up the traditional stanzaic grid by printing two lines side by side, floating lines freely in white space, thus problematizing a linear reading order.

*Imagen* and the poetics it expresses would have been important for Altolaguirre. In fact, the terse syntax of the “Poema del agua” that I considered above is very similar to that of the poems comprising one of *Imagen*’s sections, “Zodiaco,” or the final lines of the poem “San Juan.” The letter Altolaguirre sent Diego after reading this book is of great interest for our exegesis of Altolaguirre’s poetics. On the crucial date of this piece of correspondence, 17 June 1925, the artistic enthusiasms which criss-cross Altolaguirre’s text (some might say contradicting one another) are

particularly telling about his aesthetic development at the time. Altolaguirre, it seems, met Diego in Málaga in the spring of 1925 during the latter's visit to several Andalusian cities (*Epistolario* 30). He seems totally overwhelmed not only by the poetry in *Imagen* but also by Diego's ideas on aesthetics gleaned in conversation in Málaga. He says that the kind of metaphors in *Imagen*, created not through the five senses but through a "sentido poético, atributo anímico, cualidad del verdadero artista," might mark a new path for poetry in Spain (*Epistolario* 29). Curiously, Altolaguirre also congratulates Diego in this letter on the recent announcement of his winning the Premio Nacional de Literatura with *Versos humanos*. The prize was awarded *ex aequo* to Diego and to Rafael Alberti, for *Marinero en tierra*, and judged by Antonio Machado, José Moreno Villa, and Gabriel Miró.

The interest of these facts is that they corroborate Francisco Chica's contention that "las vanguardias siguen resonando en la obra de Altolaguirre" throughout his production as both printer and poet of the Generation of 1927 (Chica 200).<sup>16</sup> In fact, it seems that in 1925 and 1926 Altolaguirre explored the *avant-garde*, Juan Ramón Jiménez, and 'rehumanized' poetry with equal enthusiasm, while at the same time, discovering much of the *avant-garde* rather late.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the *avant-garde* came to bear on Altolaguirre's thinking at the same time as Juan Ramón Jiménez's poetry or popular Andalusian song and *not* as an eclipsed, past moment in Spanish poetry. All in the summer and fall of 1925, Altolaguirre meets Gerardo Diego and becomes familiar with his poetry informed by the *ultraísta* and *creacionista* aesthetics of the *imagen múltiple* and typographical experimentation; he founds with Emilio Prados the Imprenta Sur and lays plans for *Litoral*; he meets Juan Ramón Jiménez (Neira 69); and he reads with great interest the popular lyrics of Alberti and the traditional stanzaic forms then taken up by Diego and other poets of the Generation of 1927.<sup>18</sup> This fits well with what Díez de Revenga documents as the huge variety among the poets of the period, the various, changing, evolving aesthetics that they share, disagree upon, adopt, and shed (30).

The analysis which I have performed in this essay on the "Poema del agua" might be characterized as a close reading, but I certainly hope that it has not been a myopic one, an old reproach of New Critical close readings. I greatly appreciate, for example, Barbara Herrnstein Smith's remarks "On Method" in a talk at Columbia University's Heyman Center in May 2015. In her lecture, provocatively titled in the past tense, "What was 'Close Reading'?", Smith convincingly defends the role of close reading within newer paradigms such as "distant reading." She sees, as I do, a false



opposition between the two, since the broader “scale” and “knowledge” that digital humanities and distant reading hope to bring to literary studies are ultimately to be used to extend close reading to a wider range of material. A distant reading approach, like the one championed by Franco Moretti, might privilege the study of the networks of printers, typographers, booksellers, and poets shaping the poetry of Spain’s “Edad de Plata,” allowing us a bird’s-eye view of the artistic panorama of the time. As a precursor to the kind of digital scholarship and distant reading Smith is talking about, we may look to Susan Sontag’s disapproval of “interpretation” which sets the course for her 1966 book, *Against Interpretation*.<sup>19</sup> The final thrust of the opening piece of this book is the injunction “to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more” (14). I would add, following Smith, that we must do this *in order to perform more and better close readings*. The fact that a typographical reading may be performed in the case of Altolaguirre’s “Poema del agua” is an indication of the poet’s historical debt to *avant-garde* indeterminate metaphors. It is also, and especially considering Altolaguirre’s work as one of the foremost printers of the poets of the Generation of 1927, a clue that his thinking about typography and printing bore heavily on his readings of poetry. Following both Sontag and Smith then, we should learn to allow the material, the typographical, and the historical constituents of a text to inform our readings, and indeed this poem and its moment should guide us not only in the reading but the teaching and editing of other texts from the period, especially ones printed by Altolaguirre and Emilio Prados. I shall again cite George Bornstein to help us to remember how the materiality of texts can be of great significance to their meanings and transmission: “textual scholarship must necessarily always remind us that any embodied form of a text is a contingent product of concrete historical and economic institutions rather than a transparent conduit of an author’s unmediated words” (8). The only way to read a poem is to get close to the material artifact of the text, and so modern editions should strive to look and *be* like the first. Altolaguirre’s “Poema del agua” may indeed remind us of this: “para el encuentro el tacto,” reads line nine.

I shall couple my mention of George Bornstein’s textual criticism with Stanley Fish’s rather simple but liberating contention that texts “are not *meant* to be solved but to be experienced (they signify) ... consequently any procedure that attempts to determine which of a number of readings is correct will necessarily fail” (465). The material parameters of any text may be important for the various readings which it might offer up, but this is especially true in the case of the historical *avant-garde’s* material poetics

and the metaphorical indeterminacy upon which this depended. The “Poema del agua” is rich because it is metaphorically pluriform in its typographical specificity. The analysis of Altolaguirre’s choices in typeface, spacing, paper and ink colour, and other material details of his texts, amen those of his contemporaries, might well make up many further studies. There is no room to treat these items here, but I can at least end with the assertion that they matter.

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## NOTES

- 1 The “*Litoral* group” might be understood as shorthand for the moniker “Generation of 1927,” itself more a symptom of processes of canon formation than a real group (See Anderson). *Litoral*, under the stewardship of Altolaguirre and Emilio Prados, published early poems by Jorge Guillén, Federico García Lorca, Luis Cernuda, and other now canonical poets of the period, as well as drawings by Dalí and Picasso. The special issue dedicated to Góngora (October 1927) is especially well known, but the magazine as a whole, though short-lived, was a very important outlet for Spain’s most promising young poets.
- 2 The majority of the lines are unproblematic hendecasyllables, but there are many exceptions. James Valender and Antonio Carreira have considered some possible variants or explanations for these irregularities (*Poesías completas [y otros poemas]* 556-7).
- 3 Phonic materiality is, without a doubt, also an important aspect of this poem. Typography is not unconnected to this kind of materiality, but in this study we shall restrict our focus to tactile and visual materiality.
- 4 I owe thanks to an anonymous reviewer of this manuscript for the suggestion that “vetas” might also be reminiscent of the molten lead of a linotype machine taking the shape of a prepared line of text. While Altolaguirre had up to this point in his life, I believe, only used hand-set type in platen presses, he certainly would have been aware of linotype technology and may have had it in mind as well.
- 5 Again, other metaphorical readings of these terms are possible. María Luisa Álvarez Harvey’s monograph deals with the instances of earth and sky in Altolaguirre’s poetry as metaphors for the span between physical existence and spiritual attainment.
- 6 This reading recalls Pedro Salinas’s reflection on Altolaguirre’s work as the printer of his friends’ verses: “La verdad es que este Manolito ha trabajado

- más que ninguno de nosotros, él, el único que ha hecho cosas con las manos, con los músculos, obra de obrero, pasándose horas y horas, en un zaquizamí, sudando, sonriendo, cayéndose de sueño” (59).
- 7 Antonio Carreira even wonders if the color “Blanca” has not been mistakenly omitted. The inclusion of the adjective would remedy the metrical abnormality of the line (*Poesías completas* 556-7).
- 8 Psychologists call the resultant cognitive discombobulation the Stroop effect, named after the 1935 study of the phenomenon by John Ridley Stroop.
- 9 It is from the 1917 volume (104) and appears in Zlotescu’s edition in volume III (160).
- 10 Very near the end of his life, Altolaguirre came close to extracting some *greguerías* from his poems. In homage to Salvador Rueda Altolaguirre chose from among his works single lines or sometimes pairs which he felt were particularly beautiful and powerful. He called them “versos azules,” following Rueda, and some can be read as *greguerías*. See Valender’s notes to the *Poesías completas* (552).
- 11 “Yo en el monte” lends a particularly interesting ambiguity to the question of subjectivity in this poem since the line might be understood to refer to high terrain from which the speaker looks down on his small boat in the harbour. But “el monte” may also simply mean, “the brush,” or “the woods,” without necessarily implying any higher ground. If the subject is in the thick of the woods he cannot see his boat and so the subjectivity of the perspective observing the boat is especially diffuse.
- 12 Romojaró discusses this same kind of ‘reversibility’ in Altolaguirre’s work in her 2008 book, but to my mind with less focused treatment (44-5; 101-3).
- 13 This is the traditional metaphor of tenor and vehicle, direct substitution.
- 14 A restatement of part of Vicente Huidobro’s “Arte poética.”
- 15 That is, *poesis*, creation or ‘making.’
- 16 Still in 1948 and exiled in Mexico, Altolaguirre calls Diego’s *Imagen* and *Manual de espumas* “obras maestras.” Juan Manuel Bonet rightly points out the important material and plastic connection between Altolaguirre’s enthusiasm in this regard and his appreciation for Manuel de Falla’s music and especially Juan Gris’s painting (“Soledades pintadas” 327-8).
- 17 While James Valender considers the death of Altolaguirre’s mother in September of 1926 the catalyst for his rejection of ‘*avant-garde*’ poetics and the ‘rehumanization’ of his verse (*Viaje* 112), Altolaguirre’s own recollection is that Prados, considering Altolaguirre’s fixation on his mother’s death unhealthy, reanimated his interest in Ortega’s *deshumanización*. Altolaguirre and Prados did not agree on *deshumanización*, but they discussed the topic at length and shared mutual enthusiasms (*Obras completas* I, 52).

- 18 James Valender states in his 2005 *Viaje a las islas invitadas* that Altolaguirre met Jiménez in 1924 (114). In the same volume, Francisco Chica is not so sure; perhaps it was 1924, perhaps it was 1925 (199).
- 19 A great example of the utility of projects of this kind is the Residencia de Estudiantes's portal, *Revistas de la Edad de Plata* ([http://www.edaddeplata.org/revistas\\_edaddeplata/](http://www.edaddeplata.org/revistas_edaddeplata/)).

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