

# JULIO ANTONIO, THE “SCULPTOR OF THE RACE”: THE MAKING OF A MODERNIST MYTH<sup>1</sup>

CAROLYN P. BOYD  
University of California, Irvine

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The talk of the town in Madrid during January 1919 was the unprecedented public response to the exhibit of a recently completed funerary monument by the young and relatively unknown Catalan sculptor Julio Antonio. Starkly lit in a darkened room in the Palacio de Bibliotecas y Museos, the monument was a study in pathos that depicted a grieving mother, señora La Portilla de Lemonier, kneeling over the lifeless body of her eleven-year-old son Alberto. Writing in *El Sol*, Ramón Pérez de Ayala reported that thousands of people, “desde el Soberano hasta los menestrales,” had braved the winter cold to view the “Mausoleo Lemonier. “La gente se arremolina y se estruja para penetrar hasta la famosa estatua. En ocasiones, la impaciencia provoca ligeros tumultos. Los guardias, que procuran en vano poner orden, contemplan con

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<sup>1</sup> La autora preparó este trabajo en 2009 para un libro inédito, editado por Malcolm Compitello y Edward Baker y titulado *Cultura, formas de representación y la lógica de los objetos: España 1850-2000*. Se publica aquí su última versión, adaptada a las normas de *Historia y Política*.

estupefacción el advenimiento de una nueva fase revolucionaria, el motín por ideas y emociones estéticas”<sup>2</sup>. Even newspapers usually indifferent to the art world reported the phenomenon for what it was — the social and cultural event of the winter.

Julio Antonio was unable to savor his triumph, however, because he was in a sanitarium, where he died of tuberculosis on February 15, just short of his thirtieth birthday. News of his death elicited an astonishing public outpouring of grief and appreciation for an artist whose work had hitherto received little recognition from the official art establishment. Among the mourners at his funeral were José Ortega y Gasset, Ramón Menéndez Pidal, Ramón Pérez de Ayala, Gregorio Marañón, Luis Araquistáin, Ramón Gómez de la Serna, Salvador de Madariaga, Manuel Azaña, Julio Romero de Torres, Lluís Bagaría, Isaac Albéniz Ignacio Zuloaga, Joaquin Sorolla, and a host of other artists and intellectuals. For these long-time friends and supporters, the posthumous apotheosis of Julio Antonio was bittersweet. Writing in *España*, Luis Araquistáin pointed out that the sculptor, cherished by his friends for his sincerity, would have been profoundly disgusted by “ese falso y aparatoso homenaje de este mundo oficial español que veía, en su última exposición, más que una gran obra de arte, un punto de cita social”<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, the publicity surrounding Julio Antonio’s tragic death presented the opportunity to achieve belated recognition for his work. In April 1919 his supporters organized a show of his “Bustos de la Raza” at the Teatro Real that drew almost as much attention as the Lemonier exhibit three months before. The conde de Abásole, a recently-ennobled Liberal deputy and industrialist, subsequently purchased seventeen of the Bustos from the artist’s family for 100,000 pesetas in order to present them to King Alfonso XIII. The king in turn ceded them to the Museo de Arte Moderno in Madrid, where until 1933 they were prominently displayed in the “Sala Julio Antonio.” In the decade after his death Julio Antonio’s supporters supplied the public with a steady stream of fulsome appreciations of his work. In 1922 they erected a bust of the sculptor in the gardens of the Biblioteca Nacional, and seven years later, they inaugurated another at his birthplace in Tarragona province. After the mid-1930s, however, Julio Antonio’s star began to fade, only to re-emerge in the last twenty years or so, as critics have begun to appreciate his contributions to the renewal of figurative sculpture in Spain.

The reverence in which the leading literary and artistic figures of his day held Julio Antonio’s limited body of work seems today somewhat mystifying.

<sup>2</sup> Pérez de Ayala (1991): 177.

<sup>3</sup> Araquistáin (1926): 33.

While acknowledging his gifts, art historians now agree that his work represented a final attempt to revitalize a sculptural tradition that was drawing to a close, rather than the expression of a new aesthetic. The future of twentieth-century sculpture in Spain, as elsewhere in Europe, belonged to abstract artists like Pablo Picasso, Pablo Gargallo and Julio González. Nevertheless, many of the progressive intellectuals that we now associate with the so-called Generations of 1898 and 1914 were unconditional admirers who considered Julio Antonio to be little less than a messiah. For Pérez de Ayala, Julio Antonio heralded “el renacimiento de la escultura española”, while Gómez de la Serna hailed him as “el resurrector”. For the art critic Margarita Nelken, he was simply “el escultor más grande desde el renacimiento”<sup>4</sup>. By the time of his death, his reputation had acquired mythic proportions. The aim of this essay is to understand the “myth” of Julio Antonio by analyzing the context in which it took shape. The elements of the myth provide a window on to the political and cultural values of the modernist intellectuals of the early twentieth century who elevated Julio Antonio to the ranks of the most exalted Spanish artists of all time. Examining the cult that grew up around the artist and his work provides an opportunity to explore the dialogic relationship between the artist, his work, and his audience, between creation and reception.

## II. JULIO ANTONIO, HIS LIFE AND WORK

“Julio Antonio” was the *nom d’artiste* of Antonio Rodríguez Hernández, who was born in Mora d’Ebre (Tarragona) in 1889. His father, an Infantry lieutenant of Castilian origin, was stationed at the local Caja de Reclutamiento; his mother was from a local family. Antonio’s vocation and talent for sculpture became apparent at an early age, and he never seriously deviated from his pursuit of an artistic career as the family moved from Tarragona, to Barcelona, to Murcia and finally, to Almadén, where his uncle managed a mining enterprise. At age 18, like other aspiring young artists from the provinces, he was drawn to Madrid, where, with the aid of a subvention from the Diputación Provincial de Tarragona, he secured a place in the workshop of the successful modernist sculptor Miguel Blay. He soon concluded, however, that he had little to learn from Blay or any of the other “mezquinos constructores de ‘bibelots’” who then dominated the heights of official art in Spain. As he wrote to his parents, he was determined to learn directly from “las grandes obras de los grandes maestros clásicos, les diré que me enseñen dónde está el

<sup>4</sup> Nelken (1916-17): 433.

misterio de la forma y de la belleza... entonces será cuando triunfe mi inteligencia y haga caer de sus pedestales gloriosos a los falsos ídolos que están explotando la imbecilidad e ignorancia nacional”<sup>5</sup>. Sharing a rented studio with Miguel Viladrich, a young painter from Lleida, he led an independent, bohemian existence that combined desperate poverty, incessant work, and hard living.

Soon after arriving in the capital in 1907, the young artist began attending the tertulia presided over by Ramón María del Valle-Inclán in the *Café Nuevo Levante*. There he encountered writers and artists like Zuloaga, Romero de Torres, Pío Baroja, Darío de Regoyos, Jacinto Benavente, and the feminist republican journalist Carmen de Burgos (“Colombine”), as well as aspiring intellectuals of his own generation like Bagaría and Eugenio Noel. Columbine, his companion in late-night carousing in the *barrios bajos* of Madrid, introduced him into her salon, which included younger art critics like José Francés and her lover, Ramón Gómez de la Serna, who became one of Julio Antonio’s closest friends. When Ramón launched his famous tertulia in the *Café Pombó* in 1915, Julio Antonio was among the founding participants. Thus, despite his provincial background and lack of formal education, Julio Antonio absorbed the latest ideas in literature, art and politics through his wide circle of friends, mentors, and acquaintances.

Unable to afford sculptural materials, Julio Antonio at first poured his energy into drawing, an activity to which he remained devoted throughout his life. In 1908 after an exhibit of his sketches at the *Ateneo Obrero* in Tarragona, he and Viladrich embarked on a picaresque journey through Aragon, Navarre and Old Castile, where like so many other artists of the day, they immersed themselves in the spirit of the landscape and its inhabitants. The following year receipt of a travel grant from the *Diputación de Tarragona* enabled Julio Antonio to make a three-month visit to Rome, Naples and Florence. The first-hand encounter with the great sculptors of the Italian Renaissance, especially Donatello and Michelangelo, made a profound impression on his subsequent work and seems to have prompted his decision to adopt the classicizing sobriquet “Julio Antonio”. Returning to Spain after a brief stopover in Paris, he installed himself in Almadén, where he began the series of sculptural portraits of ordinary folk known as “*los Bustos de la Raza*.”

By 1910 the first of the *Bustos* were beginning to attract favorable notice among progressive critics like Gómez de la Serna, who featured them in his new vanguard literary review *Prometeo*. In a public lecture in Madrid in 1911 Ramón hailed the young sculptor as the “*Pelayo español*” who was pioneering

<sup>5</sup> Salcedo Miliani (1997): 29-30.

the rebirth of a truly “Spanish” sculpture<sup>6</sup>. Over the next several years, favorable reviews of Julio Antonio’s work appeared in influential magazines like *Europa*, *Gran Mundo*, *España*, and *El Año Artístico*. But despite these accolades from the literary avant garde, the official art establishment paid Julio Antonio little notice, and the young sculptor returned their disdain. He never received an invitation to exhibit at the annual *Exposición Nacional*; indeed, the *Bustos de la Raza* received no public showing during his lifetime. Meanwhile, his health was beginning to deteriorate seriously. Around 1911 he began consulting Gregorio Marañón, then a brilliant young clinician specializing in infectious diseases and endocrinology at the General Hospital of Madrid. The two became good friends, despite their considerable differences in background and education, but Marañón proved unable to counteract the deleterious effects of poverty and dissipation on his friend’s health.

In 1911, while still in Almadén, Julio Antonio won a competition sponsored by the Ayuntamiento de Tarragona for a monument commemorating the local heroes of the War of Independence. After five years of experimentation, he arrived at a design that he believed would be “la obra definitiva que tal vez podría immortalizarme...”<sup>7</sup>. Thereafter, he devoted much of his energy to public statuary, although most of the monuments he conceived were never built. Commemorative sculpture requires patronage, and Julio Antonio’s proposals were too controversial—both aesthetically and conceptually—to win public approval in a society deeply divided over national history and identity. Alongside his obsession with monumental public sculpture, Julio Antonio continued to produce more *Bustos de la Raza*, as well as several smaller private commissions and portrait busts, including one of Goya at Fuendetodos, the artist’s birthplace, commissioned by Zuloaga. In 1918 Julio Antonio completed a controversial public monument to the popular composer Ruperto Chapí, which had been paid for by the Sociedad de Autores Españoles and was inaugurated in the Parque del Retiro in 1921. His final commission, the Lemonier Mausoleum, brought him the acclaim that had long eluded him, but as we have seen, he had only a few weeks to live.

Critics then and since have disagreed on the exact nature of Julio Antonio’s gifts and on where his talent and vision might have taken him had he lived. Nevertheless, a general consensus exists on his significance in the history of Spanish sculpture. He appeared at a transitional moment, between the tired academicism and overwrought naturalism of late nineteenth century official art and the revolutionary break with the figurative tradition by the

<sup>6</sup> Gómez de la Serna (1996) 1:105-118.

<sup>7</sup> Santos Torroella (1969): 13.

*vanguardistas* of the 1920s. Inspired by classical antiquity and Italian Renaissance sculpture, he sought to infuse his realistic portrayals of the Spanish *pueblo* with humanist ideals. Rejecting the narrative conventions of contemporary Spanish sculpture, he captured both the individuality of his subjects and the universal human qualities that transcended their particularity. Technically, he restored concern for volume, form, and plasticity, essential sculptural qualities that had been sacrificed to pictorialism during the previous decades. His “obra subversiva”<sup>8</sup> thereby laid the foundation for the preoccupation with pure form, mass and space that characterizes twentieth century abstract sculpture.

As the initiator of a revitalized realist tradition in Castile, his influence on his immediate successors and the next generation of sculptors was considerable. But as noted above, in the longer run, his contribution to the general trend of twentieth century sculpture was limited. In fact, the mythification of Julio Antonio and his work was an effect of the inward-looking character of intellectual discourse in the Madrid of his day, reflecting its isolation from contemporary European developments in painting and sculpture. Julio Antonio’s sculpture responded to that discourse, in which the quest to “Europeanize” Spain was in constant tension with the desire to discover and preserve an authentic Spanish identity. As the material embodiment of that tension, his work and the myth that grew up around the artist himself reflect the intellectual and political preoccupations of the men and women who hailed him as the “redeemer” who would lead Spanish art into the new century.

### III. MODERNISM AND THE MYTH OF JULIO ANTONIO

To unpack the myth of Julio Antonio, the place to begin is with its creators — the writers, artists, and cultural critics who together have variously been labeled the generations of 1898 and 1914, the regenerationists, the generation of 1900, or the *modernistas*. It is not the intent of this essay to join the debates over nomenclature and generational classification that for the last half-century have engaged many literary historians of this period<sup>9</sup>. Rather, I hope to shed some light on the complex attitudes and contradictory impulses of the group of writers and artists who rose to prominence in Spain at turn of the twentieth century by focusing on an artist who was

<sup>8</sup> Gaya Nuño (1957): 59.

<sup>9</sup> Useful discussions of these debates may be found in Hoyle (2000); Bretz (2001), and Soufas (2007).

widely admired by many of them, regardless of their other aesthetic or political commitments.

In general, I share the outlook of critics and historians who have argued that the intellectual and cultural history of Spain between 1890 and 1936 can best be understood as the national variant of international modernism, a complex movement that encompassed the multiple cultural responses to modernity.<sup>10</sup> Spanish *modernismo*, like its counterparts elsewhere, stood in ambivalent relation to the forces of modernization that brought it into being. Urbanization, secularization, the emergence of mass society, and the expansion of the public sphere gave birth to a new class of artists and writers, the first to be self-identified as intellectuals (i.e., public commentators, arbiters and critics), who believed it their responsibility, as individuals of superior intelligence and sensibility, both to protest the hypocrisy and fraudulence of Restoration society and to articulate the aspirations of the "authentic" Spanish people. Outsiders alienated by position and background from the established institutions of political and social power, they were conscious of belonging to an extended regenerationist movement that was united by a longing for a new culture both faithful to authentic Spanish tradition and open to fresh ideas from abroad. But apart from a shared sense that they represented "the new" against "the old," they were not otherwise internally coherent as a group. On the contrary, they differed widely in their understanding of national history and identity, their diagnosis of the source of Spain's decadence, and their proposals for national regeneration<sup>11</sup>. As Juan Ramón Jiménez observed<sup>12</sup>, modernism was an attitude rather than a particular school or style, entailing self-conscious rebellion against the status quo and a desire for purification and renovation in Spain's political, social, and cultural life.

After his arrival in Madrid, Julio Antonio became an integral part of this milieu. An impressionable young man of few words and little formal education, he absorbed, eagerly and somewhat indiscriminately, the aesthetic and philosophical radicalism that saturated the circles in which he traveled. In his personal life, he embraced his mentors' protest against convention more fully than they did themselves. Despite his minimal formal training, he sought to

<sup>10</sup> For arguments in support of the choice of "modernism" to characterize this group of writers, artists and critics, see Bretz (2001); Hoyle (2000); Gullón (1963); Salaün and Serrano (1991); Mainer (1987) and (1998); Kirkpatrick and Cruz (2003), and Cardwell and McGuirk (1993).

<sup>11</sup> Juliá (2004).

<sup>12</sup> Gullón (1963): 33.

develop a personal theory of sculpture; both he and his companion Viladrich were “conscientes de su obra de un modo filosófico”<sup>13</sup>. The eclecticism of his art made it possible for his friends and acquaintances, whatever their views on art, politics, and life, to see something of themselves in him. His circle of admirers included such opposites as the *vanguardista* Gómez de la Serna and the classicist Pérez de Ayala, the *flamenquista* Romero de Torres and the *anticasticista* Eugenio Noel, the conservative Azorín and the socialist Araquistáin. Julio Antonio was thus the personification of the *modernista* ethos, both influenced by and reflective of its complex aspirations, ideals, frustrations, and internal contradictions.

Julio Antonio’s mythification clearly owed a great deal to his personal charisma. Everyone who knew him commented on his generosity, vitality, and idealism. Pérez de Ayala described him as “un alma fina y aristocrática alojada en un cuerpo gentil y hermoso”<sup>14</sup>. Ambitious and full of hope, he was capable of working for days without rest or proper sustenance. At the same time, he refused to make the artistic and personal compromises that would have brought him public acclaim or the favor of the art establishment in Madrid. As Julio Camba noted, “...es incapaz de trabajar para nadie más que para él y la eternidad”<sup>15</sup>. For his modernist admirers, Julio Antonio’s personal independence and artistic integrity, both of which were purchased at considerable cost to his economic well-being and his health, marked him as the incarnation of their highest ideals. Sent to redeem the official art world of favoritism and sycophancy, Julio Antonio appeared as the messiah “que había de traer la luz que había de alumbrar el camino a los desorientados...”<sup>16</sup>. Gómez de la Serna’s 1909 play, “La Utopía,” which was written with Julio Antonio in mind, is both an indictment of the “silencio y soledad” to which the pure artist is condemned in a society marked by vulgarity, materialism and hypocrisy and an homage to the artist who adheres to his ideals in the face of incomprehension and indifference<sup>17</sup>.

Equally attractive to Julio Antonio’s admirers was his extravagant bohemianism, which was a product of his poverty and his youth, but also partly temperamental; he was “un hombre que andaba febrilmente a la busca de los elementos de las almas y de las cosas”<sup>18</sup>. In dress he usually affected a Spanish

<sup>13</sup> Gómez de la Serna (1996), 1:258.

<sup>14</sup> Pérez de Ayala (1991): 180.

<sup>15</sup> Infiesta (1988): 109.

<sup>16</sup> Ballesteros de Martos (192-?): 198.

<sup>17</sup> Gómez de la Serna (1956) 1: 291-324.

<sup>18</sup> Araquistáin (1926): 33.

version of the "Latin Quarter" style. He embraced life with passion, attracting an endless parade of women, respectable and otherwise. Those who eulogized Julio Antonio after his death never failed to mention the amorous adventures that helped define him as "un hombre elemental." Neither bourgeois comforts nor bourgeois morality tempted him; tellingly, his favorite novel was *The Red and the Black* and its self-fashioned hero Julien Sorel, and his personal bible was *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, a philosophical enthusiasm he shared with many other modernistas<sup>19</sup>. A native Catalan whose art and life were dedicated to Castile, his tastes and habits were preferentially Andalusian, much to the despair of his good friend, the *anti-flamenquista* Eugenio Noel. According to Gómez de la Serna, he "parecía un gitano entre los gitanos," consorting in his studio with gypsies, and devoting hours to playing the guitar. He frequented flamenco bars with Colombine and like Valle-Inclán and Pérez de Ayala, was an aficionado of *los toros*. After accompanying the symbolist painter Romero de Torres on several visits to Córdoba, he sought enthusiastically, if unsuccessfully, to gain support for a monument in honor of the beloved *torero* Lagartijo.

Even as they worried about the consequences of his bohemianism for his precarious health, Julio Antonio's friends admired his spontaneity and freedom from the bourgeois conventions that, with a few exceptions (like Noel and Valle-Inclán), governed their own lives. For Pérez de Ayala he was "la alondra"<sup>20</sup>; for Araquistáin, "el hombre elemental," who in another, less pedestrian, age might have been "capitán de un corsario" or "el buen bandolero, implacable con los ricos, generoso con los pobres"<sup>21</sup>. Romantics that they were, they saw in him pure spirit, a primitive force of nature, untainted by "la ciudad, con su influencia corruptora y mercantilizante"<sup>22</sup>. Marañón claimed, "No he tratado nunca a ningún ser humano que me haya impresionado, que me haya hecho la impresión de genialidad, disparada, a veces exorbitante — como un torrente a quien le viene el cauce estrecho..."<sup>23</sup>. Gómez de la Serna believed that the sculptor's febrile bohemianism masked a deep melancholy rooted in his failure to achieve the glory he deserved. "Era el moro y no encontraba su alcázar... Era el desterrado de su poder y de su harén, aunque no de su patria. Iba poblando su vida de estatuas, de bustos, de recuerdos fehacientes de la raza que él debía dominar, de las mujeres que él debía tener

<sup>19</sup> Nelken (1916-17): 417.

<sup>20</sup> Pérez de Ayala (1991): 184.

<sup>21</sup> Araquistáin (1926): 33, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Araquistáin (1926): 33.

<sup>23</sup> Santos Torroella (1969): 26.

compradas y de las que debía ser el dueño”<sup>24</sup>. As Gullón has noted, the modernists, frustrated by their own social marginalization and disgusted by the crass materialism of the industrial age, identified strongly with the romantic Hero who suffers in the pursuit of beauty, as well as with the figure of Don Juan, the conqueror who alternates between disdain for women and the quest for an unattainable feminine ideal<sup>25</sup>. Julio Antonio not only epitomized the quintessentially romantic seeker of truth, but his transgressive conduct also conjured up images of “los hologorios locos de hembras, de vino, de zambros sensuales y locas...”<sup>26</sup>.

The sculptor’s premature death at age 30, rendered both tragic and ironic by the long-awaited popular triumph of the Lemonnier mausoleum, encouraged further mythification. Although his fortunes had not been significantly worse than those of other struggling artists, Julio Antonio’s friends and supporters portrayed him as a victim of the establishment and bitterly denounced the posthumous “discovery” of his brilliance by those who had previously slighted him, like the fashionable sculptor Mariano Benlliure, then Director General de Bellas Artes<sup>27</sup>. For his friends at the revista *España*, Julio Antonio’s death was “como el último gesto de orgullo y incorruptibilidad” against the hypocritical blandishments of “la España oficial”<sup>28</sup>. His admirers interpreted his early death as the inevitable price of artistic genius: “Su espíritu era una llama y en su propio ardor fue consumiéndose”<sup>29</sup>; his life “se extinguió como una lumbre que corre un momento, en la noche, por el cielo sereno”<sup>30</sup>. The phrase “los elegidos de los dioses mueren jóvenes” echoed endlessly through the press. That his final work was a funerary monument was deemed a portent of his early demise, one intuited both by the artist and his intimates. Critics debated whether Julio Antonio had already reached his full potential or was only beginning to achieve his artistic goals. For Noel, the artist’s untimely death, brought about by false friends whose *flamenguismo* had sunk him in “una perversión salvaje,” prevented the full realization of his destiny as the sculptor of the Raza<sup>31</sup>. Others, however, suggested that his early passing would ensure that his reputation remained intact. Had he lived, they feared

<sup>24</sup> Gómez de la Serna (1956) 1:201.

<sup>25</sup> Gullón (1963): 40-41.

<sup>26</sup> Francés (1919): 28.

<sup>27</sup> Camba (1960).

<sup>28</sup> Araquistáin (1926): 34.

<sup>29</sup> Pérez de Ayala (1991): 185.

<sup>30</sup> Azorín (1954): 140.

<sup>31</sup> Infesta (1988): 114.

that popularity would have brought him awards and commissions and inevitably compromised the purity of his art<sup>32</sup>.

#### IV. JULIO ANTONIO AS THE “SCULPTOR OF THE RACE”

However important his outsized personality was to the construction of the myth, the modernist intellectuals expressed even greater reverence for Julio Antonio’s aesthetic vision. By the turn of the century, Spanish sculpture was widely denigrated as decadent and inauthentic. The established sculptors in Madrid —Benlliure, Querol, Marinas and Blay— who received commissions, invitations to exhibit, and memberships in the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, prided themselves on their (frequently gratuitous) technical virtuosity and their narrative, naturalistic style. Commissioned to create the commemorative monuments whose increasing numbers marked the expansion of public spaces in Madrid’s urban core, they sought to instruct and enlighten by depicting their subjects, in characteristic dress and pose, at historic or heroic moments in national life. Younger art critics like Nelken, Pérez de Ayala and Juan de la Encina deplored what they saw as the vulgarity, artificiality and lack of harmony of these statues, as well their excessively pictorial and rhetorical quality. In their view, Spanish sculptors had forsaken the essence of classical sculpture: its focus on volume and mass and its indifference to the transitory and anecdotal. In the press and the conference hall, these critics waged an unremitting campaign against “los fabricantes de merengue endurecido”<sup>33</sup> and their “pragmatismo chabacano”<sup>34</sup>.

The sobriety and purity of Julio Antonio’s work contrasted vividly with the “immoralidad estética” and the “superchería y bambolla del arte oficial,…”<sup>35</sup>. Pérez de Ayala, Encina, Noel, and Nelken particularly admired his revitalization of a classical tradition that had grown stale and academic during the previous century. As the realism of the earliest Bustos de la Raza was in the later works tempered and deepened with idealism, and as individual particularity became a vehicle for the expression of universal ideals, their enthusiasm for his sculpture mounted. Pérez de Ayala’s first encounter with the Bustos produced an epiphany: “...aquellas cabezas de tan acusada individualidad y al propio tiempo tan típicas, tan personales, y al propio tiempo

<sup>32</sup> Camio (1929).

<sup>33</sup> Prudencio Iglesias Hermida, in Santos Torroella (1969): 25.

<sup>34</sup> Encina (1920): 18-19.

<sup>35</sup> Encina (1919): 3-4.

tan genéricas, tan locales, y al propio tiempo tan universales, tan étnicas, y al propio tiempo tan hermanas, tan expresivas, y al propio tiempo tan serenas; aquellas cabezas tan complejas en resolución, y al propio tiempo tan sencillas, me dejaron suspenso un gran espacio sin poder apartar la vista de ellas, como si aguardase que me describiesen un secreto: el secreto estético de la escultura”<sup>36</sup>. Julio Antonio captured the serenity and balance of Hellenic art, while avoiding slavish imitation and emotional coldness; his genius was to breathe new life and passion into classical values and make them relevant to the modern world. By taking “del pasado todo aquello que es menos de pasado que de hoy”<sup>37</sup>, his art connected the living past with the desired future. The epitaph devised by Pérez de Ayala’s for the commemorative plaque at his birthplace honored him as the “último de los escultores clásicos y primero de los modernos”<sup>38</sup>.

Equally attractive to the modernists were the symbolist influences in Julio Antonio’s work, which aimed to render the inner, spiritual reality of things, not merely their externalities. The modernists shared the symbolists’ conviction that truth must be sought in realms remote from the artificial bourgeois world in which they were obliged to live—in the imagined past, in nature, in the primitive, in the pueblo. For this reason, critics like Noel lavished praise on the austere “arcaísmo” of Julio Antonio’s monument to the Heroes of Tarragona<sup>39</sup>, which represented the city as an idealized, hieratic female figure, presiding with dignity, quiet pride and even detachment over the limp bodies of her dying sons. The mythic quality of the figures, as well as the sculptor’s decision to replace the usual triumphalist rhetoric with understated stoicism, broke decisively with the conventions that governed contemporary commemorative art. Likewise, it was the “monumentality” of the Bustos, their fusion of inner subjectivity and external serenity, that excited modernists.

But even as they extolled the universalistic elements in Julio Antonio’s art, the modernists also hailed it as quintessentially “Spanish.” As Calvo Serraller has noted, the quest for a “national” style preoccupied European artists from the mid-nineteenth century onward, and by the turn of the century, the same question preoccupied cultural elites in Spain. As their contribution to national regeneration, Spanish artists and critics dedicated themselves to the recovery of an authentic national artistic tradition that, in

<sup>36</sup> Pérez de Ayala (1991): 183.

<sup>37</sup> Manuel Abril, in *Infiesta* (1988): 108.

<sup>38</sup> Santos Torroella (1969): 17.

<sup>39</sup> Noel (1926): 126.

their view, had been eclipsed by both the derivative academicism and the “españolista” costumbrismo of the nineteenth century. Their quest to align contemporary art with that authentic tradition helps explain their appreciation of a sculptor who strove to capture the “genio nacional” in his work. The synthetic, eclectic quality of Julio Antonio’s art enabled critics of widely disparate opinions to cite it in support of their own preconceived notions about national identity. That eclecticism, which arose partly from his lack of formal training, partly from his openness to a variety of contemporary aesthetic styles, and partly from his conscious quest to capture the essential spirit of the Spanish sculptural tradition, explains the enthusiasm of contemporaries who were themselves seeking to identify a “national” character transcendent of the cultural pluralism of the peninsula. In Nelken’s view, Julio Antonio’s artistic eclecticism reflected the nation’s history of racial and cultural fusion: it was “el resumen del arte escultórico de España y su más alta representación”<sup>40</sup>.

In the *Bustos de la Raza* Julio Antonio consciously set himself the task of capturing the essence of the Spanish *pueblo*. He confessed his ambition in an interview with José María Salaverría in 1917: “Tengo el proyecto, no se si temerario, de hacer en bronce la descripción plástica de las gentes españolas. Creo que es un plan moderno y patriótico que debe intentarse. Hasta ahora he reproducido los ejemplares de Castilla, después visitaré otras regiones, llegaré a Andalucía y Aragón, modelaré marineros de Levante y del Cantábrico... Pretendo ser en fin el escultor de la Raza”<sup>41</sup>. Like Zuloaga, twenty years older and more pessimistic in his vision of the Spanish character, Julio Antonio located the true spirit of the nation among the anonymous men and women from the popular classes, in defiance of the prevailing bias in favor of noble or heroic subjects. Both the “modernity” of this choice and its political implications won the admiration of intellectuals who shared the conviction that the solution to the “problem of Spain” lay in discovering and awakening popular virtues that had for centuries been stifled by the governing classes. In this project, the role of the intellectual was to identify, interpret, and speak for the collective spirit of the nation. Julio Antonio’s desire to convey “la gravedad, la hondura y la grandeza del pueblo” made him the darling of intellectuals on the same quest<sup>42</sup>.

That said, there was little agreement as to what was typically “Spanish” in Julio Antonio’s art —further proof, if any were needed, of the constructed

<sup>40</sup> Nelken (1916-17): 454.

<sup>41</sup> *Julio Antonio [1889-1919]* (2001): 35.

<sup>42</sup> Aguilera Cerni, in *Infiesta* (1988): 111.

nature of national identities and traditions<sup>43</sup>. Defining “la Raza” was a highly subjective undertaking that depended entirely on *a priori* assumptions about the components of the national character. As his reference to “las gentes espanoles” and his appreciation for gypsy culture suggests, Julio Antonio himself seems to have valued the peninsula’s ethnic and regional pluralism and to have avoided the reductionist assumptions common to many turn of the century intellectuals who equated Castile with “Spain.” But this did not deter his admirers from effusively praising his “esfuerzos denodados por hablar y fijar en la material...el español en estado de naturaleza— el íbero”<sup>44</sup>.

What was striking about the modernists’ claims about the “Spanish” or “Iberian” elements in Julio Antonio’s work was their essential incompatibility. Although they shared the conviction that the key to national regeneration lay in the proper comprehension and reinterpretation of the national past, their views on national history and identity were remarkably divergent<sup>45</sup>. Critics who wished to establish Spain’s “European” character emphasized the classical Greek, Roman, and Renaissance influences on his art. Nelken and Encina, on the other hand, argued that the specifically Mediterranean character of Julio Antonio’s sculpture lay in its “orientalism” or “bizantinismo” —the same qualities that made El Greco the supreme “Spanish” painter. Those pre-occupied with the recovery of “lo castizo” viewed Julio Antonio as the heir to the Castilian *imagineros* of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and noted the obvious similarities between the Bustos de la Raza and the silver “head reliquaries” found in many Spanish churches. For the critic Ballesteros de Martos, for example, the Bustos shared with Castilian polychromatic sculpture the “intenso dramatismo que palpita y se esconde en la esencia misma de la raza”<sup>46</sup>. Julio Antonio’s fascination with color, texture, and surface decoration, on display in works like the “Mujer de la Mantilla,” convinced others that he was the modern incarnation of an ancient “Iberian” artistic tradition that originated with the Dama de Elche, then recently excavated and on exhibit in the Louvre. Ironically, almost none of his contemporaries, whether in Madrid or Barcelona, viewed Julio Antonio as a “Catalan” artist, despite the affinities between his sculpture and the classicizing movement known as *noucentisme* that then dominated Catalan art.

As the modernists searched for the “real” nation, they were also seeking to create a public receptive to their ideas about national renewal.

<sup>43</sup> Nieto Alcalde (1997).

<sup>44</sup> Araquistáin (1926): 31.

<sup>45</sup> Fox (1997); Boyd (1997), and Juliá (2004).

<sup>46</sup> Ballesteros de Martos (192-?): 199.

Writing appreciatively about avant garde art in his 1925 essay, *La deshumanización del arte*, Ortega y Gasset observed that modern art was elitist and “impopular” because its concerns were exclusively aesthetic rather than humanistic; as a kind of intellectual game, it was only intelligible to a select minority, not to the masses. It is possible that part of Julio Antonio’s attraction for modernist intellectuals was precisely the accessibility of his figurative sculpture, which was both “modern” —ie., aesthetically innovative in the Spanish context— and humanistic in its concerns. It thus had the potential to serve as an instrument of national pedagogy, unlike avant garde art, but also unlike the conventional sculpture whose vacuous, sentimental aesthetics only reinforced the outmoded values that had led to Spanish decadence.

Like many of the young intellectuals in his circle, Julio Antonio believed in the regenerative power of culture. His desire to infuse his art with political significance explains his obsession with commemorative monuments during the last years of his life. Wracked by illness, he felt compelled to make a difference: “Sentía más que nunca la necesidad de vivir. Vivir para hacer el bien. Vivir para aportar mi trabajo a la obra de redención”<sup>47</sup>. Through his close friendship with the political cartoonist Lluís Bagaría, Julio Antonio established connections with the progressives writing for *España*, a weekly review of culture and politics founded by Ortega y Gasset in 1915 and edited by the Socialist writer Luis Araquistáin. Reminiscing shortly after Julio Antonio’s death, Araquistáin recalled the young sculptor’s impromptu visits to the editorial offices, animated by his “sentimiento de libertad, este anhelo de recrear el mundo como quien crea una obra de arte,...” and exhilarated by the prospect of revolutionary change. “Su jactancia, medio humorística, medio seria, era ser más bolchevique que nadie”<sup>48</sup>.

Like the contributors to *España*, whose goal was to create a public receptive to reformist ideas and willing to act on them, Julio Antonio aspired to create commemorative monuments that would inspire and uplift the Spanish people. “Statuomanía” was in its heyday in the first two decades of the century; rapid urbanization, together with the cultural politics of nationalism and regionalism, provided the impetus for the commissions that populated plazas and thoroughfares with monuments to great men and great deeds. But as their numbers grew, so did their critics, who found them ugly and excessively rhetorical; as the architect Leopoldo Torres Balbás observed, “Lo verdaderamente moderno es...no querer mezclar la literatura

<sup>47</sup> Salcedo Miliani (1997): 106.

<sup>48</sup> Araquistáin (1926): 30-31

a las artes plásticas”<sup>49</sup>. By extracting “la literatura” from his monumental designs, Julio Antonio sought to revolutionize the aesthetics of public monuments while retaining their pedagogic function. This project strongly resembled the regenerationist cultural program of Spanish modernism.

Most critics then and since have considered Julio Antonio’s portrait sculptures to be artistically superior to any of his monuments<sup>50</sup>. Nevertheless, his contemporaries appreciated his efforts to break with prevailing aesthetic conventions. For Pérez de Ayala, the monument to the Heroes of Tarragona was “el más hermoso monumento español de los tiempos actuales” because its Hellenic idealism expressed universal truths about the human condition that naturalistic sculpture could never convey<sup>51</sup>. For Nelken, the colossal monument to Wagner commissioned by the Sociedad Wagneria de Madrid, which occupied Julio Antonio’s energies for several years, was destined to be “la única que encarne verdaderamente el espíritu de Wagner y *la calidad* de este espíritu...”<sup>52</sup>. The enormous sculpted head of the composer drew curious onlookers to Julio Antonio’s studio until the project was derailed by the ideological tensions provoked by the Great war. It subsequently collapsed of its own weight, surviving only as a plaster model. Julio Antonio’s monument to Ruperto Chapí was not universally admired, but it earned praise from Juan de la Encina, who pronounced it the first “modern” monument in Madrid, and from Eugenio Noel, who proclaimed it to be “una obra maestra,” for its “serenidad inefable” and its “primitivismo vibrante”<sup>53</sup>.

The modernists admired Julio Antonio’s monuments not only for their innovative aesthetics, but also for their defiance of prevailing cultural and social values. When Catholic conservatives blocked the installation of the monument to the Heroes of Tarragona on the grounds that its nude figures offended public morals, progressive intellectuals rushed to its defense. Viewing bullfighting as the hallmark of national decadence, they were less enthusiastic about Julio Antonio’s project for a statue of Lagartijo, but they rallied behind his plan to erect a “Faro Espiritual de la Raza” on the Cerro de los Angeles (“el monte Sinaí de España,” in the phrase of Gómez de la Serna). In the somewhat febrile words of the artist, the Faro was to serve as “norte de la raza venidera; guía espiritual de la Humanidad, vida de las almas, aurora nueva, el esfuerzo coronado por la plenitud de la vida en un mediodía

<sup>49</sup> Torres Balbás (1920): 170.

<sup>50</sup> García de Carpi (1985).

<sup>51</sup> Pérez de Ayala (1991): 211

<sup>52</sup> Nelken (1916-17): 450.

<sup>53</sup> Encina (1918); Noel (1924).

esplendente y glorioso"<sup>54</sup>. In 1916 the project aroused considerable enthusiasm in cities along the Mediterranean coast as well as in Madrid, where Valle-Inclán, Ortega y Gasset, Baroja, Pérez de Ayala, Marañón, Romero de Torres, and others formed a fundraising committee. Their support may have been prompted by the desire to forestall construction of a monument dedicating the nation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus at the same site. In any case, the Faro Espiritual de la Raza never emerged from the planning stage. King Alfonso XIII dedicated the monument (and the nation) to the Sacred Heart at the Cerro de los Angeles in May 1919. For his disappointed supporters, Julio Antonio's monument to youth and progress had fallen victim to "la última española."

As we have seen, after his death in 1919, many leading cultural critics considered Julio Antonio to be one of the greatest sculptors in history, whose Bustos de la Raza, in particular, signaled "el renacimiento de la escultura española." But by the 1930s, when Juan de la Encina, then serving as Director General of Bellas Artes, dismantled the Sala Julio Antonio in the Museo de Arte Moderno in Madrid, his reputation was beginning to be eclipsed by those who were taking sculpture in a new direction. As the aesthetic and political values of the turn of the century intellectuals came under assault from both the left and the right, his achievements lost some of their luster. His close association with modernism also tarnished his image among supporters of the Franco regime, even though the essentialist nationalism and realist aesthetics that characterized his art enjoyed official favor. In the 1960s his work was dismissed by champions of abstract art as an anachronistic attempt to renovate an exhausted figurative tradition.

Ironically, given the reluctance of his contemporaries to identify Julio Antonio as a "Catalan" artist as well as his close association with intellectual and artistic circles in Madrid, the recent resurgence of interest in his sculpture has its roots in Catalonia. Current efforts to reclaim Julio Antonio for Catalonia are based not merely on the undeniable fact of his birth in Tarragona and the classicism his sculpture shares with *noucentisme*, but also on essentialist claims about his "catalanitat tel·lúrica"<sup>55</sup>. Just as the modernists saw Julio Antonio as the "sculptor of the [Spanish] race," in Catalonia he is now regarded as the representative of a specifically "Catalan" or "Mediterranean" sensibility shaped by "la huella de la tierra natal y la energía del Ebro"<sup>56</sup>.

<sup>54</sup> Salcedo Miliani (1997): 106.

<sup>55</sup> Oteo Sans, Ricoma and Salcedo (1999): 15.

<sup>56</sup> Josep Mariné Grau, president of the Diputació de Tarragona, in Salcedo Miliani (1997): 10.

Catalan scholars resort to national identity, not early exposure to Roman antiquities or study in Italy, to explain the Mediterranean elements in his work, and they dismiss attempts to classify him as a Castilian realist as mere “literature”<sup>57</sup>. The renewal of interest in Julio Antonio today, no less than the adulation he received during his life, exemplifies the dialogic interaction between creation and social context that shapes artistic reputations and aesthetic canons. At the same time, his recent reemergence as an exemplar of the Catalan spirit, after a lifetime of identification with Castile and “la Raza,” provide an illuminating case study of the aprioristic essentialism that undergirds nationalist ideologies.

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<sup>57</sup> Santos Torroella (1969); Salcedo Miliani (1997).

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